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OR,
The Railroad Pards' Big Day.

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AUTHOR OF "BLACK BUCKSKIN," "LITTLE LIGHT FOOT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"ALL ABOARD."

"Now, then, Rufe, don't be so sparin' of elbow-grease. A little more polish won't hurt that brass-work, by any means. Remember, this is a special occasion, an' we mustn't allow the 'Fleetwing' to do her part lookin' like a dirty, rusty old shiftin' engine."

Standing beside the ponderous driving-wheels of his locomotive, oil-can and cotton-waste in hand, Headlight Harry paused in his occupation

HARRY KNELT AT THE VERY EDGE OF THE PLATFORM, WHILE WITH BOTH HANDS HE POISED THE PONDEROUS COUPLING BAR.

to address the fireman who, perched upon the running-board, was scrubbing away as though his very life depended on his efforts.

"Humph! I reckon them words o' youn are a leetle mite unnecessary, pard, considerin' the fact that I've be'n a-doin' the great scrubbin' act for the past hour," returned Rufe Ruffle, quickly. "It'll take mighty sharp eyesight to discover a trace o' dust or grease on the old machine when I get done with her, I'll allow."

Indeed, the fireman's assertion was fully substantiated by the appearance of the majestic "iron-horse" which was the subject of such careful attention. A locomotive superior to the "Fleetwing" never turned a wheel upon the irons, and her sterling worth had been demonstrated by long and constant service, though the uninformed observer might be misled into believing her fresh from the hands of the builder, so bright and beautiful was her appearance.

A thorough repainting had been the first step toward restoring the "Fleetwing's" original beauty, and the rest remained for Headlight Harry and his faithful assistant to accomplish. Their work was now all but finished, and from cow-catcher to tender the huge machine gave evidence of their clever handicraft. Long and sedulous polishing had transformed every inch of brass and steel-work into burnished gold and silver that gleamed resplendently in the morning sunlight. Then, too, countless yards of bunting hung in graceful festoons from every practicable position, while numerous flags and streamers fluttered idly in the breeze, going far to render the general aspect of the "Fleetwing" as attractive as it was unusual.

But why these unwonted preparations? It must indeed be, as Headlight Harry remarked, "a special occasion," to call for such remarkable demonstrations. In truth, this bright Spring morning was to witness no less an event than the completion and formal opening of the Belmont Branch of the R. & S. R. R.

The R. & S. was then among the foremost of our thriving Western corporations, and the addition of the Belmont Branch to their already extensive lines was the latest and most convincing evidence of their indefatigable enterprise. The new road, leaving the main line at Richville, extended fifty miles or more to Belmont, a prosperous and populous community nestled cozily among the foot-hills. The country *en route* was unusually wild and inhospitable, presenting such serious obstacles to railroad building that, up to date, the good people of Belmont and the several intervening places were forced to be content with the old-fashioned, slow-going stage-coach.

But now, what a wondrous change was wrought! Discoveries of precious metals in the valley had created a boom of no inconsiderable dimensions; and as a result Belmont and its hitherto unimportant neighbors were fast increasing in size and importance, and keenly felt the need of adequate transportation. To supply this much-felt want, the far-sighted management was led to project the new line in the face of well-nigh insurmountable obstacles.

So, after many vicissitudes and at an enormous outlay, the Belmont Branch at last became a reality; and its completion was deemed an occasion for universal rejoicing by those who had so long been deprived of the advantages of rapid transit.

To give full vent to popular enthusiasm, it was determined, ere opening the new road to regular travel, to devote a day to celebrating the completion of the stupendous work in a manner that should render it a veritable red-letter day in the history of that enterprising community.

Belmont was quite appropriately fixed upon as the scene of festivity; but in order that all along the line might take a part in the memorable occasion, it was arranged to run an excursion train from Richville, conveying the various railway officials as well as the hundreds of pleasure-seekers who were sure to embrace this rare opportunity for an outing. So the appointed day was eagerly awaited, and bade fair to witness a celebration long to be remembered.

To pilot the excursionists on this the initial trip over the new line, no less a personage than Headlight Harry was selected; for, though hardly more than a boy in years, no more skilled and reliable engineer than he could be found on the entire road. He was ordered to hold himself in readiness for this special duty; and so we find him at the appointed hour, together with his efficient associate, actively engaged in preparing the "Fleetwing" for her part in the prospective jubilee. It was but natural that the young fellows should feel proud of the honor conferred by the management in thus selecting them, of all others, to serve on so auspicious an

occasion; and consequently their preparations were made in a spirit of great enthusiasm.

"There, Rufus, old man! I propose we call the job complete," cried Headlight Harry, at last. "We have taxed our decorative ingenuity to its utmost, and, considering, the limited time and material at our disposal, I flatter myself that the 'Fleetwing's' appearance can scarcely be improved upon."

Rufe Ruffle walked round and round the dormant iron-horse, closely scrutinizing every point with admiring eyes.

"There's no flies on the old gal, betcher life," he declared, with more fervor than elegance. "No one with half an eye for the beautiful kin fail to fall dead in love with our pet machine, eh, Harry?"

"I fancy we need not feel ashamed to head the procession, even in such distinguished company as we shall be favored with to-day! I suppose you are aware that our first coach is to be occupied by the president, superintendent, directors, and so-forth, accompanied by their respective families."

"My eye! What an aggregation of wealth and aristocracy! I suppose the beautiful belle of Richville will be among the number."

"If you refer to Mabel Melrose, our president's daughter, I dare say the occasion will be enlivened by her presence. Indeed, the party would be incomplete without her."

"So say I, old pard; for she's just the boss gal of these parts—a reg'lar daisy from Daisyville, you hear me!"

"Yes; Miss Melrose is, indeed, an estimable young lady—as good and pure as she is beautiful," complimented the young engineer; whereat his comrade nodded approvingly.

"No wonder all the young fellers in town are clean gone on the president's daughter, for she is a prize well worth the winning," said Rufe Ruffle, garrulously. "I say, Harry, you are a proverbially lucky dog, an' quite a favorite with his royal nibs. I shouldn't be surprised if—"

Headlight Harry impatiently interrupted the speaker.

"That'll do, Rufel!" he sharply exclaimed. "I see what you are driving at, and beg to inform you that you're on the wrong tack. You are probably unaware that my matrimonial choice is already made, and that the day is not far distant when I hope to become a Benedict. My bride-elect, however, moves in the humbler walks of life, far removed from Mabel Melrose, in point of wealth and station, but none the less an embodiment of womanly purity and loveliness."

"Oh, ho! That's how the wind blows, is it? Well, I was a blockhead not to have surmised the truth afore, for all the boys have wondered what powerful attraction 'twas that brought ye so frequently to old Seth Sharon's cottage. Ha, ha! Got it right this time, haven't I, Harry?"

"Your shot comes straight to the mark, Rufe," admitted the engineer, while his handsome face flushed hotly. "But come! The excursion starts at 8 sharp, and it's now 7:50. Time for us to pull out, I should judge."

He sprang lightly into the cab, with the fireman scarcely behind him.

"An' so you've really determined to commit matrimony, old pard?" went on the irrepressible Rufus, as they moved slowly out of the round-house. "Well, here's luck to both you an' pretty Ruth, the flagman's daughter; an' don't forget to invite us boys when the interestin' event takes place. As for Mabel Melrose," he added, "I reckon she aspires to something better than a workin'-man, though they do say that Roy Noble, the Express-messenger, has bright prospects in that direction. Well, Roy's a first-rate feller, an' here's hopin' he'll reach the goal of his ambition."

While the loquacious fireman thus gave his tongue free play, Headlight Harry ran his handsome engine over the switch and thence back upon the main line to where waited the first section of the excursion train, consisting of several gayly-decorated cars, every one of which was already filled to overflowing with an eager crowd of pleasure-seekers.

Hundreds, too, of no less enthusiastic stay-at-homes had congregated to witness the departure, and the appearance of the "Fleetwing," resplendent in her gala attire, was greeted by long and hearty applause.

"All aboard!" cried the conductor, standing watch in hand as the locomotive was speedily coupled to the forward car, while Rufe Ruffle nervously jerked the bell-rope and the engineer leaned from his window to catch the starting-signal.

Promptly at the appointed moment it was

given. Headlight Harry grasped the throttle, the ponderous wheels of the iron-horse slowly revolved, and, amid the cheers of the populace and the strains of inspiring music, swelled by the clang of brazen bells and the deafening scream of steam-whistles, the first trip over the Belmont Branch was auspiciously begun.

CHAPTER II.

AN AUSPICIOUS OPENING.

AWAY rolled the long train, slowly at first, but with a gradually increasing speed that soon carried it beyond the environs of Richville and into a section of country hitherto untraversed by the iron steed, the wondrous scenic beauties of which immediately challenged general attention.

Now the course lay through a verdant valley, skirting the precipitous bank of a rapid stream which rushed leaping and swirling on its erratic course as if incensed at this intrusion upon its pristine solitude; then, crossing the creek upon a lofty trestle, the road ran for miles through the heart of the virgin forest, where mighty trees arose on either hand and interlocked their giant branches overhead. Anon, a flourishing village would greet the eye—one of the several communities along the line whose suddenly increasing size and importance had influenced to no small degree the construction of the Belmont Branch; then off again rumbled the train into another stretch of wilderness where Nature reigned in primeval grandeur.

So, the special wound rapidly upon its serpentine course, skirting a verdant hillside here, crossing an airy trestle there; now clattering noisy through a narrow defile or hanging upon the very verge of a giddy precipice, while ever and anon the "Fleetwing's" lusty whistle awoke the echoes of the surrounding hills. Every turn in the road brought some fresh scenic feature into prominence, and added to a panorama of such rare, kaleidoscopic beauty as to hold the eye enthralled by its magic power.

Owing to the extreme length of the excursion train, together with the fact that every inch of the way was strange to the alert engineer, rapid running was scarcely to be expected; but the time was passed pleasantly by all on board, and, after an exhilarating ride of two hours' duration they found themselves at their journey's end.

When the living stream of humanity poured from the cars, it was to find their coming anticipated by a vast crowd that had assembled to extend a hearty welcome. Carriages were in waiting for the president's party, who, under escort of the various local companies, were immediately driven away to the scene of the forthcoming ceremonies, while the main body of visitors, less favored but equally contented, quickly added their numbers to the concourse that already filled the streets of Belmont.

It was evident that the town was now enjoying a state of excitement never before experienced in its eventful history. Expectant sight-seers thronged every thoroughfare. Public buildings, shops and private residences vied with each other in the magnificence of their decorations. From every advantageous point fluttered the glorious Stars and Stripes, while brazen bells clanged out a sonorous greeting upon the clear morning air.

Upon an improvised platform, in the center of the village green, were conducted the opening exercises of the day, for no hall was adequate to hold one-tenth of the vast concourse of eager, cheering people. In a terse speech, President Melrose formally presented the new road to the public; after which remarks were in order from various town and railway officials, together with distinguished guests, all of whom were attentively listened to and vociferously applauded.

These formal exercises being concluded, the people dispersed in every direction, to enjoy the various features which an indefatigable committee on celebration had considerably arranged for the edification of Belmont's citizens and guests. Of these it is quite unnecessary to speak in detail; enough to say that a grand military and civic procession was followed by a succession of sports and games, interspersed by frequent band concerts, while a brilliant display of fireworks in the early evening served to cap the climax of a long and varied programme.

In the mean time, having carefully housed and cared for their pet iron horse, Headlight Harry and Rufe Ruffle were free to call the time their own; so, having discarded overalls and jumper, they emerged in all the glory of holiday attire, and mingled with the gay and joyous throng.

It was but seldom that these hard-working

railroad boys found an opportunity for an outing, and they sallied forth with the determination of making this occasion one of unalloyed enjoyment. Needless to say, they were successful, flitting here, there and everywhere, like a pair of overgrown youngsters just freed from the thrall of school.

Not until the approach of nightfall did Headlight Harry call a halt in the continuous round of pleasure.

"See here, Rufus!" he exclaimed. "Are you aware that we are guilty of a most serious offense?"

"Eh? What kind of a fence?"

"Why, in our frantic efforts to see all the sights, we have entirely ignored the inner man. I have no recollection of eating anything since early morning; and, moreover, I entertain a faint suspicion that I am hungry."

"Ay, come to think of it, I feel a little that way, myself," admitted the fireman, "though with racin' round pell-mell from place to place, a feller can't find time to skirmish for rations."

"Well, we now have just time enough for a good square meal before the next act on the programme. So, let us sample the cuisine of the 'Good Cheer Inn,' whose gilded sign I see displayed across the way."

Into the eating-house they directed their steps, and seated themselves within a vacant stall. Having issued a very substantial order to the waiter, they settled themselves to await its arrival; and it was while thus engaged that subdued voices from the adjoining apartment reached their ears.

Two men were in earnest conversation; and, though spoken in low tones, much of their speech was audible through the thin partition.

"So, then, all arrangements are completed?" came in harsh accents from one of the unknowns.

"Ay; thoroughly," was the prompt reply. "The snare is set, and nothing remains but to wait until the game runs into it."

"It is a stupendous scheme! Do you believe we shall succeed?"

"Succeed! Why, pard, success is certain. So carefully have our plans been laid that failure is an utter impossibility."

"Let us hope your confidence is not misplaced," returned the first speaker. "It is, indeed, a tempting prospect! Why, if our plans prosper, we shall—"

But, at this interesting juncture the sudden reappearance of the waiter was accompanied by the rattle of dishes, and the voice from the next stall abruptly ceased, much to the disgust of the railroaders, whose curiosity was considerably inflamed by what they had just overheard.

"I'd give a dollar to know a thing or two about them fellers next door," muttered Headlight Harry. "I've heard enough to convince me there's some kind of a job on foot, though what it is I am quite unable to guess."

Nor were the unknowns inclined to enlighten him, for they lapsed into silence the instant they became aware that the adjacent apartment was occupied. Naught came to the ears of the listeners save the occasional chink of glass or the rattle of knives and forks.

Ten minutes passed in this manner; then once again came voices, very low and indistinct. However, by applying his ear to a crack in the partition, the engineer was enabled to catch the drift of the stranger's speech.

"Well, pard, it's growing late, and I shall have scarcely time to reach the rendezvous if we dally longer here. I must be off at once; and as for you—"

"I know my duty, Cap. Bill is doubtless in waiting at the appointed place; and, you kin depend upon it, we'll be on hand to do our little act in the programme."

"Very good! Now, one more drink before we part. Here's to the success of our enterprise! May we reap a rich reward for our risk and pains."

The merry jingle of the glasses followed these sanguine sentiments, and almost immediately the mysterious schemers arose and left the place. They glanced sharply, as they passed, at the stall which sheltered the two eavesdroppers; but Harry had discreetly drawn the curtain, and was completely screened from view as he, in turn, keenly regarded the departing strangers.

"Their faces are both strange to me, yet I am positive I have heard those voices before," declared the engineer, excitedly. "It is quite evident there's mischief brewing, and I propose to follow these gay schemers and, if possible, drop to their little game."

"I'm with you, pard," promptly seconded Rufe Ruffle; and, leaving their repast half-finished, they rushed in eager pursuit.

At the door, however, a stalwart fellow coolly barred the way.

"Don't hurry so, my friends," he advised, calmly. "Gents that eat here gen'rally settle their little bill afore they depart for 'fresh fields an' pastures new.'"

Yes, yes—sure enough!" stammered Headlight Harry, who in his excitement had quite overlooked the necessary ceremony of paying at the desk. "Here, take this and get out of the way!"

He thrust a bill into a ready hand, and instantly the path was clear; but, even this slight delay was fatal to their purpose, for they reached the street only to find that the strangers had vanished. Greatly discomfited, the would-be trailers elbowed their way through the crowd, searching eagerly but in vain for their wily game.

"Bad luck to the slippery scoundrels!" grumbled the engineer with exceedingly ill grace. "I had set my mind on tracking them to fathom their designs."

"Small loss, I reckon" returned Rufe Ruffle, rather unconcernedly. "I don't imagine there's anything in the wind worth our botherin' our precious heads about."

"Perhaps not, pard; yet I'm inclined to think differently. At any rate, I'd give considerable to— Ha! There's one of the fellows, now—the tall chap whose voice sounded so strangely familiar! The worthies have parted company."

The man in question had suddenly emerged from a neighboring stable leading a powerful horse, bridled and saddled. Even as the young men caught sight of him, he leaped to the saddle and would have ridden away but for a quite unexpected occurrence.

A monster torpedo from the hand of a mischievous urchin exploded directly in front of the steed, which, in sudden fright, swerved to one side with a violence that dislodged its rider, and hurled him to the earth.

The railroad boys were foremost among the crowd that hastened to the spot, and, as the fallen horseman struggled to his feet, they saw what a change had taken place in his appearance. The force of the fall had served to dislodge his sandy beard and wig, and revealed a swarthy, sinister countenance, at sight of which Headlight Harry recoiled in undisguised astonishment.

"Nick Norman, by the eternal!" he cried.

"Ay, 'tis he, sure's the sun shines above us," echoed the fireman, no less surprised at the discovery.

As for the so-called Nick Norman, he appeared to be greatly disconcerted at the recognition. Scowling fiercely, and with a smothered oath, he clutched his disarranged head-gear and limped toward his horse, which a sympathetic bystander had caught and held at his disposal. As he gained the saddle, Headlight Harry recovered from his surprise and darted forward, shouting:

"Seize him! Stop him! He is an outlaw, with a price upon his head!"

CHAPTER III.

DANGER.

As this startling announcement burst from the lips of the engineer, all who heard stood speechless in amazement, for many recognized the name, Nick Norman, as that of a notorious criminal who had long evaded the clutches of the law.

However, the people were on pleasure bent, and had no particular desire to figure prominently in an outlaw hunt, especially when fraught with immediate danger to themselves; for the fugitive had instantly spurred forward, reins in teeth, and in each hand a heavy revolver that frowned threateningly upon the crowd.

As a result of this warlike demonstration, a path was opened as if by magic, and, with a taunting laugh, Nick Norman flashed down the street and disappeared in a cloud of dust, leaving Headlight Harry not a little exasperated at the turn affairs had taken.

It may be stated here, by way of explanation, that the fugitive horseman was a character who had figured prominently in local history during the past, though in a by no means creditable role. Originally holding a position of trust in the service of the R. & S. R. R. Co., he had made the most of his opportunity to defraud his employers, until at last found out and rewarded with a long term in prison for his various misdemeanors. The prison-walls, however, were not strong enough to hold Nick Norman, and he was soon at liberty, breathing dire threats against his prosecutors. Prompted by a fiendish desire for revenge, he deliberately planned and attempted to wreck the Night Express, but, happily, his devilish designs were frustrated mainly through the watchfulness of Headlight

Harry. After this desperate attempt to destroy lives and property, the scoundrel mysteriously disappeared, and though numerous search parties, stimulated by large rewards, scoured the country in all directions, their efforts to recapture him were unsuccessful.

Nick Norman had one motherless child—a handsome girl at that time just entering womanhood, who had found a home with a relative when her father was imprisoned; but when he regained his liberty, and fled from the country, Madge, the girl, also disappeared, and it was generally believed she had accompanied her fugitive parent, to whom she was greatly attached despite his evil ways.

Two years elapsed, and, nothing being heard of the hunted outlaw, it was believed he had successfully made his way East; and society rejoiced at being well rid of a dangerous criminal.

Now, however, a chance incident revealed the fact that Nick Norman, shrewdly disguised, was still living near the scene of his past exploits, and Headlight Harry's surprise at beholding the outlaw was equaled only by his disgust at the easy manner in which the latter effected his escape.

Separating themselves with difficulty from the inquisitive crowd, the railroad pards sought a more secluded spot where they earnestly discussed the events of the day. The engineer, especially, evinced much uneasiness.

"This surprising discovery has served to greatly strengthen my suspicions that a deep scheme is on foot," he declared. "Nick Norman is an unprincipled scoundrel, shrewd to plan and bold to execute, as his past record has shown. Depend upon it, he is laying for important game!"

"Plague take the dirty rascal! Who expected to see his 'tarnal mug ag'in? An' to think how slick he got away! Shoot my cat if I wouldn't give my last copper jest to know what the durned skunk is driving at."

"Regarding which we are entirely in the dark. We overheard just enough of their conversation to excite our curiosity without satisfying it. Nick, himself, is beyond reach, so it only remains for us to keep a sharp lookout for his late companion, who, you remember, was to meet a third party somewhere bereabouts. It is our sole chance to arrive at a solution of the mystery."

"Humph! Might as well look for the traditional needle in the haystack," returned Rufe Ruffle, dubiously; and so the sequel proved, for the most diligent search failed to reveal the well-remembered face of the man who had figured as Nick Norman's fellow-schemer.

As may be easily imagined, the remainder of the evening's entertainment had no charm for the engineer and fireman of the 'Fleetwing.' Haunted by vague presentiments of coming evil which they were quite unable to overcome, they passed the time in a state of doubt and anxiety that increased instead of diminishing as the hour for departure drew near.

While the great multitude thronged the public square, listening to lively music and gazing in open-mouthed admiration at a truly magnificent display of fire-works, the railroad boys stole away to the seclusion of the round-house, where they endeavored to shake off their uneasiness as they busied themselves in preparing the dormant iron-horse for its long homeward run.

Much sooner than was necessary the "Fleetwing" took its place at the head of the long train, while, with fast-increasing impatience, its young masters awaited the moment to start. Time passed on tardy wings, and the hour was late when the tired but enthusiastic Richvillians at length found their way on board the cars.

Leaning impatiently from the cab, Headlight Harry caught the welcome signal, and immediately his ready hand caused the slumbering monster to spring into sudden life and activity. Puffing, snorting, groaning, the mighty "Fleetwing" moved laboriously from the station with its enormous freight, and entered upon a trip that was to prove the most eventful in its history.

As the train rolled away, two dusky forms bounded upon the front platform of the first car, thence climbed noiselessly to the top of the tender and vanished as suddenly as they came. Who were they? Two tramps, no doubt, anxious for a ride, who had selected this unusual position as one least liable to visitation by an argus-eyed conductor.

Howbeit, their movements entirely escaped attention from the occupants of the cab. Headlight Harry sat, hand on throttle, peering intently through his narrow window upon the track ahead; while Rufe Ruffle, having stuffed

the fire-box to its full capacity, had settled himself comfortably back in his lofty seat to enjoy a few minutes of inactivity.

Moving at moderate speed, the train had reached a point perhaps twenty miles from Belmont, when a sharp turn in the road brought into view a sight that caused both men to leap suddenly to their feet.

A flaming red light, swung round and round by some unknown hand, mutely warned the approaching trainmen of danger ahead.

"Quick, pard! The bridge—Wild Creek trestle is right ahead! Trouble there, I reckon!" yelled the excited fireman, and he gained the hand-brake with a single bound.

But, Headlight Harry only smiled grimly as he swiftly pulled the throttle open still wider than before.

"Down with you, Rufe! Down—down, I say!" he shouted, as the engine forged ahead at increased speed; and at the same moment he threw himself upon the floor of the cab.

Wondering, Rufe Ruffle obeyed, just as they flashed by the unknown possessor of the treacherous signal lantern. Then, above the roar and rattle of the train, arose loud shouts mingled with the sharp report of fire-arms, while bullets whistled viciously into the cab, shattering glass, but inflicting no harm upon the occupants.

"Safe!" gasped the engineer, struggling to his feet. "The secret is out, now. Nick Norman has opened his game only to be euchered at the start. *Hurrah!*"

Luckless Headlight Harry! His exultance was ill-timed, for Nick Norman's plans were well laid, and peril lurked in an unexpected source. Two shadowy forms crept stealthily over the swaying tender, poised for an instant above their unsuspecting victims, then with weaponed hands uplifted, leaped into the cab with the fury of jungle tigers.

Simultaneously, the brave engineer and his associate sunk motionless to the floor, while the masterless engine, rocking and lurching, sped on with frightful velocity.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MIDNIGHT RAIDERS.

THE first section of the returning excursion train was of but moderate length, comprising six spacious coaches, each of which, however, was filled to its utmost capacity.

First in the line was the private car of President Melrose, containing the directors and high officials, together with their families and a number of distinguished guests. The next two cars were occupied by stockholders and minor officials, with their families and friends, while the remainder of the train was devoted to the accommodation of various military and civic organizations that had participated in the grand afternoon parade.

It was a merry throng, although a weary one, for a long day of ceaseless pleasure-seeking had produced a dominant desire for home and slumber; yet enthusiasm was not in the least abated, and one and all united in voting the trip an unqualified success.

Within the president's luxurious private coach—a very palace on wheels—were assembled some fifty ladies and gentlemen, representing the flower of wealth and fashion.

President Melrose, tall, portly and handsome, occupied a conspicuous position, surrounded by a group of particular friends. He was a man well advanced in years, many of which had been spent in active railroad life, and when, but a comparatively short time prior to the opening of this narrative, he stepped into his present high position, it was to bring with him a practical knowledge that at once made him much more than the mere figure-head that a railway president not infrequently represents. Already were his progressive ideas bearing fruit, for it was due mainly to his energy and influence that the famous Belmont Branch was projected and pushed to a speedy completion.

Now that the new line was a thing of reality, and the various features of the great celebration had moved without a hitch, it was quite fit that President Maurice Melrose should be, as he seemed, the personification of contentment, as he lolled carelessly in the luxurious reclining-chair, and chatted with his no less joyful associates.

At the same time, in another section of the car, his beauteous daughter might be seen, the center of an admiring group; for of all the tender sex whose presence graced that distinguished company, none could vie with beautiful Mabel Melrose, whose attractiveness of person and charm of manner made her at once the reigning belle of local society.

Bright and intellectual to a marked degree,

and with a wealthy father eager to gratify her every taste and whim, the fair girl had very sensibly made the most of her golden opportunity, and now, at the age of nineteen, found herself possessed of a thorough education, the mistress of many accomplishments, as well as a paragon of beauty, and a particularly brilliant star in the galaxy of social luminaries.

Little wonder, then, that when Maurice Melrose removed to that bustling Western country, to assume the presidency of the R. & S. R. R., the appearance of his lovely and accomplished daughter created a decided sensation among the marriageable young Richvillians, few of whom, however, dared to aspire to the affections of the queenly heiress.

Gayest of the gay was Mabel Melrose, as she reclined upon the velvet cushions, surrounded by friends and admirers. The manifold discomforts of the day were apparently quite without effect upon her, for she joined vivaciously in the conversation, her merry laughter ringing like the music of a silvery bell. With a tall, graceful form, beautifully chiseled features, sparkling brown eyes, and a profusion of wavy tresses, the young lady presented a picture of health and beauty well calculated to challenge admiration.

But, neither the merry maiden nor her friends dreamed for an instant of the perilous times in store for them; else, indeed, their merriment would have been short-lived. Deadly danger hovered over that ponderous excursion train as it rolled laboriously on its homeward way, and the feeling of security that pervaded the occupants of President Melrose's gilded palace car was destined to be rudely dispelled.

As a point was reached perhaps twenty miles beyond Belmont—a wild, desolate spot midway between two unimportant stations—there suddenly came a shriek of warning from the locomotive, while speed was slackened with an abruptness that served to quite upset the equilibrium of the startled passengers.

Almost before they could comprehend what was taking place, the train came to a dead stop, then immediately began to move backward, very slowly at first, but with rapidly increasing speed.

Of course this sudden action on the part of the engineer, quite inexplicable as it was to them, created consternation among the occupants of the cars. Amid a tumult of excited exclamations and inquiries, windows were thrown up and heads thrust recklessly out in utter disregard of consequences. Stygian darkness shrouded the scene, and even the sharpest eyes could discern nothing unusual, nor could aught be heard save the regular working of the retreating engine.

"What means this, gentlemen?" cried President Melrose, plainly showing his surprise and anxiety. "Surely, it is a most unexplainable proceeding!"

"Perhaps another train has disputed our right of way—"

"Impossible, sir! Remember that this line is not yet open to regular traffic, consequently ours is the only train on the road, excepting the one that will follow us from Belmont."

"True enough. Then, there is undoubtedly some obstruction on the track."

"In that case it would merely be necessary to come to a stop, without backing in this fashion. That confounded engineer must be either drunk or crazy!"

"Pardon me, sir!" quietly interposed Superintendent Renwood, who was the coolest man in the car. "Headlight Harry is at the throttle, and I am quite certain he is *neither* drunk nor crazy. He is one of the most reliable men in our service, and depend upon it, he has good reason for his action, however mysterious it may seem to us."

Ralph Renwood's confidence in his old-time associate, thus freely expressed, was by no means misplaced; yet, alas! he little dreamed that one other than Headlight Harry was responsible for the erratic movements of the train. At that moment the young engineer lay senseless on the floor of the cab, while above him, coolly manipulating the throbbing locomotive, stood a stalwart ruffian whose name did not adorn the payroll of the company.

It was not long, however, before the excited passengers were fully enlightened as to the true state of affairs, for while questions and conjectures were flying thick and fast, the train, after backing rapidly for a short distance, now suddenly slackened speed. An instant later the air was rent by a series of vociferous yells, while a host of dusky forms, springing up by the roadside, scrambled like wildcats upon the steps of the cars as they neared a standstill.

Imagine the consternation of the entrapped excursionists as a band of masked men appeared in their midst, armed to the teeth and evidently bent upon mischief. Ladies cowered in their seats, clinging tremulously to escorts, while those of the sterner sex were too greatly astonished to do more than stare blankly at the intruders. Their apathy may have been influenced to some extent by the fact that the new-comers had already brought their weapons to a level, in readiness to thwart the slightest attempt at resistance.

"Hands up, gents! We've got the drop, so there's no use in kicking. Hands up, I say!"

This terse command issued from the lips of a burly mask who had been the first to enter the president's coach, and who was apparently the leader of the band. Needless to say, the unwelcome order was obeyed, each and every man elevating his hands with a promptitude that won a nod of approval from the audacious stranger.

"Glad to find you all so tractable, gentlemen," he exclaimed, with a sneering laugh, as he swaggered to the center of the car, keenly surveying its terrified occupants with eyes that fairly blazed through the holes in his mask. "Doubtless you all believe that 'discretion is the better part of valor.' Very good! Such a feeling on your part is very commendable, and will do much toward facilitating matters.

"I trust you do not resent our intrusion, though it must be admitted that the hour is rather unseemly, and our method of introducing ourselves is to say the least unceremonious. However, having carefully prearranged this meeting, it was not in my heart to let you pass by, though in fact that cursed engineer did come near giving us the slip. So here we are, big as life and twice as natural, and I dare say there's none of you so thick-witted as to need enlightenment in regard to our errand. We are out for the boddle, first, last and all the time, and have selected this crowd as presenting a most promising field for operations."

The masked leader's speech was glib, his manner free and easy, yet none who heard his careless words doubted for a moment the determination of the speaker. In obedience to a signal, two ruffians now moved forward from either end of the car, while their companions continued to draw a bead upon the passengers.

"My faithful assistants will now proceed to take up a contribution, and it is to be hoped you will shell out liberally," mockingly continued the robber captain. "It is quite fair and right, to my mind, that you bloated railway nabobs and swell aristocrats should contribute to the support of poor, deserving fellows like ourselves; and if you will prevail upon yourselves to view the matter in the same light, it will perhaps deprive the dose of much of its bitterness. At the same time allow me to impress upon your minds the utter folly of resistance, for my men have you nicely covered, as you may see, and stand ready to blow you to smithereens at a second's notice."

This caution was quite unnecessary, however, for the members of the president's party were nothing if not discreet, and the sight of a dozen rifles brought to bear upon their devoted persons instantly put to flight all ideas of opposing the invaders. Quite at the mercy of the daring knights of the road, they sat with uplifted hands presenting a picture of disgust and rage that was little short of the ludicrous.

At least so it appeared to the robber chief, whose mocking laughter rung upon the ears of the hapless excursionists like that of a veritable fiend. His nefarious followers were already at busily at work deftly going through the pockets of the unresisting passengers, relieving them of money, watches, and other valuables with a skill and celerity that implied long practice.

When this operation was completed, the masked leader strode from the car, followed by several of his men, leaving the remainder to guard the doors.

Meantime the occupants of the other cars had been treated to a similar experience. The road-agents numbered fully two-score, and were thus enabled to seize the entire train at the same time, each car being boarded by a separate squad in pursuance of carefully prearranged plans. Thus it was that when the tall captain strode from car to car, it was to find the several hundred passengers under complete subjection, while the work of appropriating their valuables was already well advanced.

After satisfying himself that the conquest was complete, and issuing a few orders to his subalterns, the chief returned to the private car of President Melrose, who, together with his companions, was wishing himself well out of his unpleasant predicament.

Having yielded up everything of value to the midnight marauders, it was now expected that the latter would immediately withdraw, leaving the train free to continue its way; but, alas! the next movement of the masked leader quickly put these hopes to flight.

The train-robbers had by no means completed their dark night's work—a fact that was speedily demonstrated to the luckless excursionists.

CHAPTER V.

NICK NORMAN CELEBRATES.

It was with the arrogant air of a mighty conqueror that the robber captain re-entered President Melrose's private car, meeting with rare effrontery the battery of eyes fixed inquiringly upon him. The travelers still maintained a non-belligerent attitude, sitting with arms pointing heavenward, a picture of abject humility. The spectacle evidently struck the unknown as somewhat ludicrous, for he laughed long and boisterously.

"Ha, ha! What a docile crowd, to be sure! And such a *distinguished* gathering! To think of all the great luminaries of the R. & S. R. R. being corralled like sheep in a pen, subject to the wishes of yours truly, once an humble and despised employee of this road, but who now comes into the game with a hand full of trumps, prepared to sweep the board and capture the pot. It really tickles my vanity to— But, stop! I had forgotten, gentlemen, that you are apt to be a trifle sensitive over the matter, and must crave pardon if by chance I have unwittingly wounded your feelings in the exuberance of my glee.

"I had returned to announce that my able corps of collectors have already completed their task, and the result I believe is quite equal to expectations. Roughly estimating the value of your contributions, I should say we are enriched thereby to the extent of several thousand dollars in cool cash, not to mention enough watches, rings and other valuables to start a first-class jewelry establishment. For your generosity in responding to my request for contributions, I beg you to accept my expressions of heartfelt gratitude."

And with this the mocking scoundrel bowed so low that the broad rim of his sombrero almost grazed the floor.

"Pray spare your breath and our feelings at the same time, Sir Robber," ejaculated Maurice Melrose, white from suppressed passion. "And now, having plundered us to your heart's content, suppose you go your way and kindly permit us to go ours! The sooner we are well rid of your evil presence, the better we shall like it."

"Indeed!" uttered the masked captain, in no wise abashed by these cutting words. "I am exceedingly sorry, my dear Melrose, that I cannot immediately comply with your request. It being but seldom that I find myself in such distinguished company, I am exceedingly loth to tear myself away."

"What, then, do you propose to do—keep us sitting here all night?" demanded Superintendent Renwood.

"Far from it, my friend. You shall be free to depart before the arrival of the second section, which I am aware was ordered to leave Belmont exactly one hour behind this train. According to my calculations, it will be something over half an hour before train number two reaches this point, and in the mean time I propose to treat myself and men to an impromptu entertainment, for which I have already found abundant material aboard."

"You see, gentlemen, I was deterred by pressure of business from joining in the great jubilee at Belmont to-day, and knowing this, I trust you will excuse me if I insist upon a little celebration of my own. If you are not already sufficiently amused, I shall be pleased to have you unbend your official dignity and join in the merrymaking. Now, please step from the car, as the entertainment is about to commence."

There was a general look of bewilderment upon the faces of the passengers, none of whom had the slightest idea of what this audacious unknown was driving at.

"What infernal nonsense is this? We shall by no means leave our seats—" began President Melrose, in a towering rage; but, the ominous "click-click!" of pistol locks speedily brought him to a pause, and banished all idea of resistance from his mind.

"Everybody will please leave the car, instantly!" reiterated the masked leader, sharply; and this time there was no remonstrance.

Realizing the wisdom of prompt obedience, the passengers arose with the meekness of lambs going to the slaughter, and the car was cleared

in an incredibly short time. Meanwhile the occupants of the other coaches were compelled to join in the general exodus, and so it was that the entire party found themselves huddled beside the track, shivering in the cold night air, and surrounded by a formidable gang of ruffians whose weapons glistened dangerously in the moonlight.

At this point the railroad was skirted on one side by a narrow strip of meadow, through which flowed a broad and sluggish stream; and upon this level expanse the robber chief proposed to hold what he was pleased to call his "little celebration."

Under his direction the excursionists were quickly arranged in a circle, around the outside of which extended a cordon of outlaws, who stood prepared to enjoy the fun and at the same time frustrate any hostile movement on the part of their reluctant guests.

"Now, then, I reckon everything is in readiness for the entertainment, declared the leader, gayly, as he glanced approvingly around. "Sorry there are no seats for the ladies; but you must bear in mind that this is quite an impromptu affair, so much so in fact that it is necessary to draw upon the audience for material, there being no opportunity to engage other talent for the occasion. Now, let's see—ah! What have we here? A full-fledged, brass-band, sure enough! Well, I don't object to a little music for a starter. Step out here, you fellows, and show what you can do with the instruments."

The members of the Richville brass-band were by no means pleased at this peremptory command; on the contrary, they felt exceedingly loth to exhibit their skill for the benefit of the scoundrels who had unscrupulously robbed them but a few minutes before. However there was no alternative, so, like the sensible fellows they were, the musicians stepped out and prepared to play.

The leader of the band was a facetious individual, who looked upon the affair in its ludicrous light, and resolved to get as much fun as possible out of this disagreeable and unremitting task. With rare tact he selected a piece, and immediately the inspiring strains of "Hail to the Chief" floated upon the clear night air.

Loud cries of "Bravo!" greeted the performance, coming from the lips of the delighted outlaws, while the tall captain doffed his sombrero and gracefully bowed his acknowledgments.

"Many thanks, gentlemen, both for the music and the compliment conveyed thereby," he exclaimed. "And now, I must trouble you once more! Give us a lively one, if you please—something that will stir up my sleepy men and keep them wide-awake!"

The band responded promptly, and again the welkin rung with soul-stirring melody.

It was truly an extraordinary scene, and one the like of which was probably never witnessed before or since. The capture of the excursion train and robbery of its passengers was of itself bold enough; but the subsequent proceedings of the marauders implied a degree of audacity absolutely without a parallel. The sight of such a distinguished party, embracing railway directors and officials, with many important citizens, not to mention military, civic and musical organizations, all subservient to the extravagant notions of a facetious ruffian, was indeed as ludicrous as it was remarkable.

The midnight moon, soaring high in the cloudless heavens, shed its ghostly radiance upon the earth, revealing on one side the stream-skirted meadow with a fringe of forest beyond, and on the other a high embankment supporting the track upon which stood the throbbing locomotive and a line of brilliantly lighted cars, while in the space between stood several hundred people, men, women, and children, forming a gathering that seemed strangely out of place at such an hour and amid such weird surroundings.

It is safe to assert that a more exasperated collection of human beings never existed than was this particular party of excursionists. Some few were there who looked upon the matter as a huge joke, and welcomed so sensational and unexpected a wind-up to the day's proceedings; but these were generally the ones whose pockets had suffered little or nothing from the light-fingered touch of the train-robbers.

As for the members of the president's party, they were fairly beside themselves with disgust and anger, not so much because of their pecuniary loss as on account of the humiliating position in which they were placed. However, there was no alternative but to smother their

wrath and await the pleasure of the robber chief, which they did with fast increasing impatience.

The band ceased playing, and again the delighted ruffians united in a burst of hearty applause, which continued until their leader waved his hand for silence.

"Well done, my good fellows!" he complimented. "I will admit you play very acceptably—much better, in fact, than I anticipated. I should certainly demand an encore, were it not that time is exceedingly limited, and my desire is to give everybody an equal chance. So, you will please clear the stage to make way for the next feature,"—a command which the tired musicians were quite willing to obey.

Among the excursionists who had so unexpectedly come to grief might be seen a full-fledged company of militia, comprising a set of fine, stalwart young fellows—the pride of Richville—who had cut a brilliant figure in the grand parade, with brand-new uniforms and glittering accouterments, winning no little applause for their neat appearance and perfect military bearing. Very bold and warlike they seemed, then, keeping step to a lively tune, with polished muskets gleaming in the sun, maneuvering with the skill and precision of battle-scarred veterans. But, alas! how deceitful oftentimes are appearances! Behold them, now, encompassed by a horde of armed ruffians, passively accepting the situation without a show of resistance; for, indeed, what could their efforts avail? Their muskets were empty, while the cartridges in their belts were harmless blanks. Bayonets were their only available weapons, and the situation did not warrant the recklessness of opposing these to the death-dealing six-shooters of their captors.

It was this organization that soon attracted the attention of the robber chief.

"Hello! What have we here?" was his exclamation. "Is it possible that I have the honor of capturing a company of *bona fide* soldiers? Really, they are a fine-looking set of fellows, and, of course, as brave as they are handsome. Ha, ha! Who commands these blooming dandies, if I may ask?"

"I am the captain of the company, sir," faintly responded a dapper youth, who at that moment looked as though he would have gladly forfeited his proud position for the privilege of being a thousand miles away.

"You are the captain, eh? Well, be so kind as to step out here," and the officer meekly obeyed.

"I am a great admirer of military tactics," went on the outlaw, suavely. "Nothing interests me so much as the evolutions of trained troops, such as I know your men to be. Now, would it trouble you too much to put your company through a few exercises, just to show my benighted savages how the thing is done?"

The polite utterance of the speaker implied a command that was not to be disregarded, and, realizing that fact, the officer lost no time in getting his disgusted followers into line. Flourishing his sword, he made a desperate attempt to appear at ease as he proceeded to go through the manual of arms.

The militia were evidently unaccustomed to drilling under such unfavorable conditions, and the presence of the outlaws seemed to have a demoralizing effect upon their soldiership. They displayed no little nervousness throughout, and gave an exhibition far below their usual standard.

These shortcomings by no means escaped the critical eye of the conductor of ceremonies.

"So you call these fellows soldiers, eh?" he said, scornfully. "I'm sorry to say that I disagree with you. As a street spectacle I dare say they'll pass muster; but what earthly use would they be on a battle-field? Fellows that lose their heads in the presence of peaceable, law-abiding citizens like ourselves, with no sign of danger, can hardly be depended upon to face a storm of flying cannon-balls."

"Captain, it is plain that your men were not cut out for soldiers. They have mistaken their vocation, and it behooves me, as a benefactor of the human race, to set them right. As an initiatory step, please march them to the bank of yonder creek, and dump therein all these cumbersome traps—guns, knapsacks, canteens, and so on, not forgetting that shining sword of yours!"

This startling order fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of the dapper young officer.

"Wha—what's that?" he gasped, hardly believing he had heard aright.

"There's no necessity for repeating the command, I reckon, since I spoke plainly enough for the dullest mind to comprehend. I will merely

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state that two-score revolvers are now pointing in your direction, and—delays are dangerous, you know!"

This opinion was evidently concurred in by the ill-starred militia, for they needed no more convincing argument. In five minutes every man was minus his costly weapons and accoutrements, all of which had disappeared within the muddy waters of the stream that flowed a dozen yards away. A more wretched, crestfallen company never existed than was the "pride of Richville" at that particular moment.

The destruction of the soldiers' property gave their tormentors no little food for merriment; and none laughed more heartily than the redoubtable chieftain, who seemed bound to indulge his mischievous propensities to the utmost. Just what his next effort would have been in the way of amusement cannot be determined, for at that moment the proceedings were suddenly interrupted.

A low, long-drawn whistle reached their ears—welcome sound to the robbers' weary victims—announcing that the second section of the excursion train was approaching in the distance.

"Ha! Those fellows are right on time, I see," ejaculated the outlaw leader. "They will reach this spot within a very few minutes, so it behooves us to clear the track without delay. So, much though I regret to do so, I am forced to pronounce this entertainment at an end. You are now at liberty to resume your seats in the cars, and I would advise you to hustle lively unless you want to be left behind, for I shall start the train in exactly three minutes."

Needing no second bidding, the excursionists made a headlong rush for the train, and reached their seats in even less than the specified time, their lively movements affording a striking contrast to the reluctance with which they had left the cars a few minutes before.

In their break-neck haste, no one observed that a change had taken place in the make-up of the train. During the "entertainment" two of the robbers, acting under instructions from their chief, had run the train to a siding that chanced to be close by, and shifted it in such a manner that the locomotive was now *behind* the cars, instead of in its proper position. That the masked leader had ample reasons for these tactics was evident from his subsequent operations.

"I have taken the liberty to borrow your engine," he calmly announced, appearing once more at the door of the parlor car. "I cannot guarantee to return it in good condition, for I intend to employ it in a very peculiar manner, and do not care to answer for the consequences. However, if the machine comes to grief, such an affluent corporation as this can easily stand the loss. As for yourselves, you can well spare the engine, for the grade beyond is very easy, and the generous push I shall give you ought to send you flying into Richville in grand style."

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, thanking you once more for the pleasure of your distinguished society this evening, I will say *adieu* and leave you to continue your interrupted journey!"

Another graceful sweep of his sombrero, and the audacious scoundrel disappeared, while at the same instant the train started with a rush.

Then it was that Maurice Melrose suddenly started from his seat with an agonized cry, for at this late moment he had made a most alarming discovery.

"Mabel—my daughter!" he shrieked. "Where is my child? My God! Has she been left behind?"

The frantic words of the railroad president created a sensation among the other occupants of the coach, for, as they looked bewilderedly from one to another, it was to realize that pretty Mabel Melrose was indeed missing. Amid the general confusion and excitement, her absence had until now remained unnoticed.

Maurice Melrose fell back with a heavy groan, while over the entire party swept a thrill of dismay and horror, as they comprehended that the president's beautiful daughter, the life and joy of them all, had either through accident or treachery been left behind, and was at that moment in the power of the dreaded train-robbers!

CHAPTER VI. RIDING TO DOOM.

WHEN Headlight Harry regained consciousness, after receiving that stunning blow upon the head, he found himself lying upon the floor of his cab, bound hand and foot. The engine was at a standstill, and a tall fellow wearing a mask was perched in the engineer's seat, seemingly quite at home in his self-appointed position.

Faint and dizzy from the blow and subsequent fall, it was some time before his throbbing brain

was sufficiently clear to comprehend what had occurred. Then he reached the conclusion that the train was in the hands of robbers, and in this connection his mind instantly reverted to the meeting with Nick Norman at Belmont that afternoon.

So, then, that rascal's plot, which the engineer had sought in vain to fathom, was for no other purpose than the capture of the excursion train and robbery of its passengers. That the dastardly plan had succeeded there was not the slightest doubt, and Headlight Harry felt no little chagrin at the neat way in which he had been fooled while attempting to elude the scoundrels.

His thoughts now reverted to his late companion, Rufe Ruffle, who had been struck down at the same time by a dastardly blow from behind. By twisting his neck from side to side, he managed to include the entire cab within his range of vision, but the effort revealed no sign of the young fireman. Had the brave fellow perished? Headlight Harry's heart sunk within him at the terrible thought, for it seemed probable that such indeed had been his comrade's fate.

Notwithstanding his awkward position, the engineer, by keeping eyes and ears wide open, contrived to obtain some idea of what was going on. The subsequent operations of the man in the cab, which resulted in bringing the locomotive to the rear of the train, caused him considerable surprise and wonderment, the object of this movement being by no means clear to him.

It was not long, however, before he received enlightenment on that point. He heard the passengers as they scrambled on board the train again, and a few moments later another masked man leaped into the cab. The new-comer was the robber chief, and Headlight Harry found no difficulty in recognizing the commanding figure of Nick Norman.

The latter issued a sharp order to his satellite, the pseudo-engineer, who immediately sprung to the throttle. The engine started with a sudden jerk and rushed ahead at full speed, pushing the long train before it.

Favored by a descending grade, it required but a few moments to establish a tremendous speed, and soon, at a signal from the outlaw captain, the locomotive was reversed, while the cars shot ahead with frightful velocity, leaving a fast-increasing stretch of open track behind them.

As the engine rapidly approached a standstill, Nick Norman turned to the prostrate engineer who had viewed these proceedings in undisguised amazement. Through the holes in his mask, the robber's eyes gleamed wickedly as he glared upon his helpless prisoner.

"Ha! You have come to your senses at last, eh? I'm glad you recovered from that knock on the head in time to enjoy the fun. Pray, what do you think of the situation anyway?"

Thus tauntingly spoke the outlaw captain; and, without waiting for a response, he continued:

"I've just given your friends a glorious send-off—one they'll not forget in a hurry. As you are aware, the line from here to Richville fairly runs down hill, so there will be little loitering along the way. If they are lucky enough to keep on the rails, which I am rather inclined to doubt, they will at least receive a shaking up that will last them a lifetime."

"And now for you, my bold fellow! If I mistake not, you are one of the chaps who tried to effect my capture at Belmont to-day. Again, it was you who nearly succeeded in giving us the slip an hour ago. You are altogether too enterprising, my dear fellow, and it is my purpose to see that you are less troublesome in the future. You are the only person who knows my identity, and that alone is sufficient reason why I should end your career without delay."

"Now, Headlight Harry, I am about to cancel the debt I owe you. How do you think I shall go about it? Listen! I have seized this engine for your especial benefit. On it you will ride to your destruction. You are of course well aware that another train is now on the way from Belmont—in fact, is now almost due at this point. I shall send this locomotive on to meet it! In five minutes you will come together with a crash that will make the very mountains shake. Where will you be then, my bold fellow?"

Coolly, deliberately this fiend in human guise pronounced the doom of his victim, and little wonder that Headlight Harry felt the blood run cold in his veins as he listened to that merciless speech.

The engine was at a dead stop now, and suddenly on the quiet air came the whistle of the approaching train, scarcely a mile away.

"There she comes! Let her go, Tom, and jump for your life," cried Nick Norman, eagerly. "Farewell, my dear fellow, and when you meet Old Nick don't forget to give him my very best regards!"

Again the "Fleetwing" was set in motion, and as she glided smoothly over the rails Norman and his subordinate leaped hastily from the cab, leaving luckless Headlight Harry to his fate.

Standing upon the track and watching the lone engine until it flashed round a curve and disappeared from view, the robber captain laughed loud and long in ghoulish glee; but had he seen what transpired a moment later, his mirth would have instantly given place to utter astonishment.

As Headlight Harry lay helplessly on the floor of the cab, fully comprehending his peril—realizing that his pet machine was swiftly bearing him to a horrible doom, yet unable to lift a finger for preservation, he was about to close his eyes and await the awful shock that seemed inevitable, when suddenly—

Over the projecting edge of the roof was swung a long, lanky pair of human legs, and down to the floor dropped an individual, at sight of whom the amazed engineer uttered a cry of gladness.

"Rufe Ruffle, by thunder!" he ejaculated.

"Glad you recognize me, pard, for I've been banged round so much that I'm afeared my own mother won't know my ugly pictur'," grimly returned the fireman.

He quickly checked the speed of the flying engine, then drew a jackknife and cut away the cords that bound his friend, and assisted him to arise.

"I had given you up for dead, Rufe," gasped Headlight Harry. "How in the world came you—"

"No time to explain now, pard. Give you the whole yarn later," quickly interrupted Rufe Ruffle. "There's work cut out for us now, you bet!"

"Yes, we must take the back track instantly. We are running straight into the Special, and—Heavens! There it comes now. It is too late!"

Not three minutes had elapsed since Nick Norman dispatched the "Fleetwing" on its wild career, so promptly and efficiently did the brave fireman perform his work of rescue; but, even then, it seemed too late to avoid the impending catastrophe, for as Headlight Harry spoke the approaching train rushed suddenly into sight, its great headlight flaring brightly in the darkness.

Quickly the "Fleetwing's" whistle sounded a succession of short, shrill warning notes; then the two gallant fellows nerved themselves to endure what promised to be one of the most exciting periods of their lives. No more could be done on their part then, for already was their engine coming to a stop. Everything depended upon the engineer of the excursion train.

The latter was on the alert, and made a desperate attempt to stop his train; but to accomplish that feat in time to avoid a collision seemed utterly impossible, for the long line of heavily-loaded cars was plunging over the downgrade at a tremendous rate, seeming to defy all efforts to interrupt its rapid flight.

Though fully realizing the horror of the situation, the men aboard the lone engine never for an instant quailed before the trying ordeal. While all individual peril might have easily been averted by jumping, no idea of such a selfish course was entertained by either, when, by sticking to their posts, it was barely possible to avoid a horrible disaster, involving the lives of hundreds of passengers.

Not a word was spoken as, side by side, they stood with eyes fixed anxiously upon the advancing train. There was no need for speech, for the thoughts of both were the same;—each read the situation at a glance, realizing that the train could not be stopped in time, and that the only hope lay in reversing their own engine and retreating before that on-coming avalanche of destruction, thus lessening the force of the collision if, indeed, not evading it entirely.

Could this be done? A few seconds more would tell. The "Fleetwing" moved at a snail's pace, now—her huge drive-wheels had almost ceased to revolve, but the insatiate monster in front still bounded forward at seemingly undiminished speed, closing up the intervening space with appalling rapidity.

It was an ordeal well calculated to try the nerves of all concerned. Headlight Harry and Rufe Ruffle stood like marble images, firm in their resolve to stick to their posts. Not so, however, with the fellows who manned the other engine! They had made a noble effort to

stop the train, but, failing in this, and face to face with what seemed sure destruction, their courage suddenly deserted them and they sought safety by leaping desperately from the cab.

Only a glimpse of their flying forms was seen ere they became swallowed up by the night; yet it was enough to reveal their rash movements to the dismayed crew of the "Fleetwing."

"Fools—cowards!" exclaimed Rufe Ruffle. "They have leaped to their own destruction."

At the same instant both became aware that their own engine had come to a dead stop. The moment so eagerly awaited had arrived at last, but was it not too late? There, right ahead, was that fire-breathing monster of destruction, its great Cyclopean eye glaring wickedly upon them. Was it within human power to avert the impending collision?

Headlight Harry sprung to work with a will. Even at that trying moment his head was clear and his nerves steady. Over went the lever—open flew the throttle! The driving-wheels spun round and round with lightning-like velocity, but the ponderous iron-horse never moved an inch from its position.

"Give 'er the sand!" yelled the engineer; and Rufe Ruffle, ever alert, obeyed even as the order was given.

"She moves—she moves!" he cried, joyously. "We'll fetch it, sure! *Hooray!*" and the brave fireman fairly danced in sudden excitement. However, his exultation was short-lived.

The "Fleetwing" moved over the irons slowly at first—so slowly; then faster, faster—yet faster, but alas! too late to escape her insatiate pursuer.

For the heavy train was upon them, now; and, an instant later, there came a thunderous crash as the pursuing engine overtook the fugitives, dashing into the tender of the "Fleetwing" with awful force!

CHAPTER VII.

OUTWITTING THE FOE.

THE immediate result of the collision was a shock so violent that the crew of the lone engine were hurled headlong to the floor, where they lay for some moments, stunned by the fall and quite oblivious to what was transpiring about them.

When at length they recovered their scattered senses, it was to find that, instead of being at the foot of the embankment where they really expected to bring up, they were still flying over the rails at full speed.

By little short of a miracle the "Fleetwing" had kept the irons, despite that terrific shock; and as the young fellows scrambled to their feet, it was with due appreciation of the rare good luck that had preserved them from a frightful fate.

Evidently the excursion train had escaped equally free from injury, for it was seen to be still advancing, though now some distance away, for it was running solely by its own momentum while the "Fleetwing" was under a full head of steam and, having successfully withstood the collision, was now rapidly leaving the train behind.

All immediate danger from that direction was now averted, and Headlight Harry at once proceeded to check the wild career of his speeding engine, being doubly anxious to accomplish this purpose when he realized that they were rapidly returning to the point where they had left Nick Norman and his rascally gang; for, when the latter dispatched the "Fleetwing" on its way to meet the approaching train, it was mainly to cause a wreck and place the second party of excursionists, also, at their mercy. So, then, it was quite probable that the robbers were now hurrying forward, eager to ascertain the result of the dastardly scheme, and none too much time remained in which to prevent the train from falling into their hands.

The locomotive was stopped as quickly as possible and sent flying back to where the long train, its momentum finally exhausted, had just come to a standstill. As the "Fleetwing" rolled up, she was instantly surrounded by an excited throng of trainmen and passengers, who assailed the brave crew with an avalanche of inquiries.

Singling out the conductor in charge of the excursion, Headlight Harry uttered a few words of explanation that caused the eyes of that worthy to fairly start from his head in mingled surprise and terror.

"A nice state of affairs, this is!" he ejaculated. "What in thunder shall we do to outwit the scoundrels?"

"You must return to Belmont without a

moment's delay," declared the young engineer, promptly. "I am sure the gang is near at hand, —they are liable to burst upon us at any minute!"

"But, why return?—why not keep on our way and run right through the rascals? They would find hard work to stop us, I reckon."

"Perhaps; but at the same time such a move would only give them a chance to work no little mischief, for if they saw you escaping they would not hesitate to fire a volley into the cars. Remember there are women and children aboard, and if you care anything for their safety you will take the back track without further palaver."

This plain speech was sufficient to convince the conductor of the wisdom of Headlight Harry's advice, and he at once declared his willingness to act accordingly.

"Your engineer and fireman were foolish enough to jump. They may have escaped unharmed, but I doubt it. At any rate we have no time to look for them. Is there any one here competent to pilot this train back to Belmont?"

"Here, pard!" and, as the speaker pushed his way through the crowd, he was quickly recognized as a regular employee of the company who was enjoying the pleasure of a "day off."

"Hello, Johnson! you're just the man for the place," exclaimed Headlight Harry, while his face brightened visibly.

The new-comer leaped into the cab, with one of the train hands to act as fireman, and, as the bell clanged warningly, there was a rush on the part of the passengers to get aboard.

"You will follow us to Belmont, I suppose?" inquired Blake, the conductor, as he swung upon the platform of the first car, lantern in hand.

"Not we! Our duty lies in the opposite direction," firmly responded the gallant young engineer. "The first train is at this moment running wild over the down grade toward Richville. Hundreds of lives are in jeopardy. We must overtake and save them!"

"Howlin' tomcats!" interrupted the shrill voice of Rufe Ruffle. "Hear come the 'tarnal skunks, now! Blame their ugly bides!"

His keen eyes had detected the shadowy forms of the outlaws as they hurried round a curve into view, and thus by his vigilance was prevented a complete surprise. The spectacle that met the gaze of the ruffians was scarcely what they had looked for, but they quickly comprehended how matters stood and dashed forward yelling vociferously.

The new engineer of the special acted promptly, but he speedily realized the enormity of his task when he undertook to start that long line of heavily freighted cars up the ascendant grade. To his horror and disgust the train scarcely moved from its position.

For a moment there was a frantic din as the puffing, snorting iron-horse labored furiously at its colossal task, its great drive-wheels slipping, its whole frame quivering from the violence of its efforts, while the exultant outlaws advanced with rapid strides. Then Headlight Harry, abandoning for the present his original idea of rushing past the enemy, came backing down to the rescue, realizing that one locomotive was inadequate to the trying occasion.

And now two mighty giants were pushing at the refractory line of cars. How speedily was the situation changed! Slowly the long train moved backward—exasperatingly slow at first, but with an impetus that steadily increased with every passing moment.

Even then, it seemed for a time that the fleet-footed pursuers would actually win the race. Spurred on by Nick Norman, who himself led the chase, they strained every nerve to "overtake and capture the retreating engines. But, the crisis was now past, and, as the train gradually got under way, the superiority of steam over human muscles was quickly demonstrated.

Finding themselves outwitted, the outlaws abandoned the chase, sending their compliments in the shape of a rattling volley which fortunately did no damage.

"Sold, ag'in!" exclaimed Rufe Ruffle, in high glee over the providential escape of the train. "Now, what's the next move, pard? Shall we go back through this howlin' mob an' try to overtake t'other train?"

Headlight Harry merely nodded in reply, as he shut off steam and reversed the lever. It required but a glance at his stern, resolute face to show that he fully realized the peril of the president's party, and would use every effort to aid them.

Meantime, the outlaw band was still hovering near the track, and, when the "Fleetwing"

slackened speed, these sharp-eyed rascals did not fail to observe the fact. Divining the purpose of the daring railroad boys, and determined to thwart them if possible, they dashed down the line at a gait that would have done credit to a one hundred yard sprinter.

Consequently, when the locomotive came to a dead stop, and just as Headlight Harry was about to again send it rushing forward, he was amazed to behold the foremost of the gang as they dashed within the radius of light thrown by the great reflector.

That they were dangerously close was seen at a glance; and there was no doubt that they would make a desperate attempt to board the engine as it sped past.

"Trouble ahead, Rufel!" cried the engineer, as his steady hand once more sent the "Fleetwing" bounding forward. "Arm yourself with whatever comes handy; then lay low and look out for unwelcome visitors."

While speaking, the engineer felt for the revolver that he always kept in a small locker under his seat. With this small but serviceable weapon clutched in his good right hand, he felt equal to any emergency.

Rufe Ruffle, for want of a better weapon, snatched up his long, heavy fire-poker, and, brandishing this, declared his willingness to cope with any number of outlaws.

"Ready to repel boarders!" he shouted recklessly. "Howlin' tomcats! but this is a great night for scrimmages, an' no mistake. Bring on yer 'tarnal gang an' see me make 'em tired! Whoop-ee!"

Crouching low to escape pistol-shots, the gallant fellows waited with remarkable coolness until the "Fleetwing" flashed into the very midst of the robbers.

The latter had sprung to either side of the track, and now, as the engine sped by at moderate speed, there was a desperate effort on the part of several to jump aboard. The attempt could not be called a signal success, as the majority of the fellows received only a severe shaking up and a plunge down the embankment as a reward for their zeal.

A few, however, either more agile or more fortunate than their comrades, managed to gain a foothold on the steps of the cab, and for a time made matters interesting for the plucky young defenders.

The latter were somewhat disconcerted at sight of four burly ruffians climbing into the cab, but they had prepared themselves to entertain visitors, and lost no time in giving them a warm reception.

The outlaws who appeared on the engineer's side of the locomotive were greeted by a storm of lead from Headlight Harry's trusty six-shooter, which, though delivered hurriedly, could not be otherwise than effective at such close quarters. One fellow, badly wounded, fell back and disappeared from sight, yelling in pain and terror; his companion, after receiving a bullet in his right arm and another through his cheek, concluded that the vicinity was too hot for safety, and, turning, leaped precipitately from the cab.

While the fearless engineer was thus uncereemoniously disposing of his assailants, Rufe Ruffle found his own attention fully occupied. Grasping the long poker as if it were a lance, he made a vicious lunge at the first outlaw whose head appeared above the footboards.

Probably that fellow never realized what struck him, for, as the end of the novel weapon caught him fairly under the chin, he shot back out of sight like a stone from a catapult.

The remaining ruffian, meantime, found time to draw a weapon and level it at the head of the brave fireman, who discovered his peril just in time to duck his head and thus avoid the speeding bullet, which even then flew close enough to perforate his cap.

Before a second shot could be fired, Rufe recovered himself and brought his formidable weapon to bear upon the foe. Struck squarely in the breast, the latter was lifted from his feet and hurled backward with terrific force, while the pistol fell harmlessly from his hand. He was partially stunned by the fall, and before he could arise the agile fireman pounced upon him like a cat upon a depredatory rodent.

"Kick away, ye durned skunk! I reckon you cal'd at the wrong house, this time, cuss ye!" panted Rufe, finding little difficulty in subduing the feeble efforts of the half-dazed ruffian. "I say, pard, I've got a prisoner! Lend a hand with a rope, or somethin', till I make the blamed critter fast."

Headlight Harry hastened to his comrade's aid, and, utilizing the same cords with which he had himself been recently bound, he soon had

the fallen outlaw secured beyond all possibility of further resistance.

"Humph! I was confident of beating off the gang, but really I didn't count on taking a prisoner," exclaimed the engineer, regarding the pinioned ruffian with interest. "Drag the scoundrel into the light, and let's see what he looks like when divested of that infernal mask."

The movement was immediately executed, and as the disguise fell from the captive's face, the railroad parts both gave a start of recognition.

"Sneaky Sam, by thunder!" fell from the fireman's lips.

"It is, indeed, the illustrious Samuel," averred Headlight Harry. "I'd swear to his handsome mug, anywhere."

They recognized in the so-called Sneaky Sam a roving young vagabond who frequently appeared in Richville and vicinity. He enjoyed an unsavory reputation in the community, having served time for various minor offenses, and was generally regarded as capable of any manner of villainy.

His was a brutal, hangdog face—an unmistakable index to the character within; and, as he glared unflinchingly at his captors, his small, twinkling eyes glowed with all the subtle venom of a lurking reptile.

"So, Sneaky Samuel has turned train-robbler, eh?" ejaculated the fireman, after a brief silence.

"Shoot my cat if I ain't surprised! Never thought he had the spunk—robbin' hen-roosts is more in his line!"

"If all of Nick Norman's satellites are of like caliber, that individual is to be congratulated upon bringing together a choice collection of rascality. It's just such scamps as Sneaky Sam that require the closest watching. However, I reckon this escapade will settle his career for good."

"What d'ye propose to do with the pesky galoot, now that we have him corraled? I say, throw him off the bank, body, bones and breeches. He'll never be missed, I reckon."

"We would scarcely be justified in such proceeding," objected the young engineer, laughing at his pard's grim suggestion. "I think we can find a better use for the fellow presently. He possesses a mine of knowledge regarding Nick Norman's band that, if properly worked, will yield valuable information. Just now, however, we have no time to bother with him; so we'll tuck him gently away in the tender until we are ready for business."

"Plaguey little information ye'll get outer that feller, if I read him right," declared Rufe, with a glance at the scowling face of the prisoner.

"Well, that we shall see in due time. There are ways of loosening the most stubborn tongues, and I fancy this chap will prove susceptible to the influence brought to bear upon him," returned Headlight Harry, confidently.

Without further talk the captive was dragged into the tender and deposited on the wood-pile, in which uncomfortable position he was left to his own reflections, while the others turned their attention to the more important work before them.

Meanwhile, the "Fleetwing" was speeding along at a lively rate. Nick Norman's rascally gang was long since left behind, and from them there was nothing more to fear. Thanks to the desperate efforts of the railroad pards, the outlaws' designs against the second train had been happily frustrated; it now remained to succor those who, less fortunate, had already fallen victims to their fiendish malice.

Realizing that a long and exciting chase was before them, the brave fellows now lapsed into silence, intently watching the track ahead as the great iron-horse rushed madly on its mission of rescue.

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM THE FRYINGPAN INTO THE FIRE.

CONSTERNATION seized upon the occupants of President Melrose's private coach, as the dread truth dawned upon them that beautiful Mabel, the light and joy of the party, had, in some unaccountable manner, been spirited from their midst.

Maurice Melrose had fallen back in his cushioned seat, utterly overwhelmed by sudden sorrow, while his friends, hardly less affected, gathered solicitously about him, extending tender words of sympathy.

"Oh, Mabel, my child! May Heaven preserve her from the clutches of those ruffians! scoundrels!" groaned the grief-stricken magnate.

"Cheer up, sir! Things may not be so serious

as they seem," encouraged Superintendent Renwood, to whose sanguine mind a sudden idea had occurred. "There is room for hope that your daughter is still safe."

"Safe?"

"Yes; it is quite possible that she, becoming separated from us in that mad scramble for the train, has found her way into another coach. I will go at once and ascertain if such is, indeed, the case."

Like a ray of sunlight through a lowering cloud came these cheering words to the tortured mind of President Melrose. Eagerly he struggled to his feet.

"Your solution is a plausible one, Renwood. God grant it is correct!" he cried fervently. "Come, I will join you in the search. Let me hasten!"

The magnate's portly frame fairly shook with excitement as he hurried from the car, accompanied by Ralph Renwood and several other gentlemen.

Alas! for their new-born hopes. Though they traversed the entire length of the train, it was only to find that Mable Melrose was not aboard, nor could any one be found who could throw a gleam of light upon the mystery of her sudden disappearance.

Bitterly disappointed, the searchers retraced their steps; hope had yielded again to dark despair. No doubt remained, now, that the poor girl had fallen into the power of that arch-villain, Nick Norman.

Maurice Melrose buried his face in his hands and wept like a child.

"Poor girl! I fear I shall never see her sweet face again," he sobbed. "Alas! that I should have lived to see this evil hour."

"Do not give way to despair, Mr. Melrose," urged Ralph Renwood, earnestly. "Rest assured, sir, your daughter shall soon be restored to you. My first act after reaching Richville will be to organize a strong party to pursue and punish those scoundrels. They shall pay dearly for their dark night's work."

Thus, with words of encouragement, his friends sought to cheer the afflicted president, but with little success. He fairly idolized his beautiful daughter, and this was a blow too severe to be easily overcome. He abandoned himself to despondency and refused to be comforted.

Meantime, during the excitement attending the discovery of Mabel's absence, the occupants of the coach had given heed to nothing else; but, now the rocking, swaying motion of the train reminded them that they were being borne onward at a reckless speed, without the controlling hand of an engineer to guide them.

This knowledge at first caused little anxiety, for no one realized then the magnitude of the new danger that menaced the ill-starred train.

Even Ralph Renwood, experienced railroad man that he was, felt quite at ease in this novel position. He was confident that, by using the powerful hand-breaks, the train might be easily kept under control and brought safely into Richville.

As the speed already attained seemed rather faster than was consistent with perfect safety, the superintendent resolved to test the efficiency of the brakes without delay; but in so doing he made a discovery as unwelcome as it was startling.

Stepping out upon the front platform, he attempted to "set up" the brake, only to find such a feat impossible, for the brake-chain had somehow become disconnected, thus rendering the entire appliance useless.

Investigation showed that every brake on the train was similarly crippled. Here, then, was fresh evidence of Nick Norman's fiendish cunning. Having determined upon giving his victims a long-to-be-remembered ride, he had taken every possible precaution to prevent them from terminating the trip quicker than he intended. During the recent stop some of his villainous gang had found time to cripple all the brakes, thus placing the train without the slightest controlling power.

This unlooked-for discovery lent a decidedly different aspect to the situation, and caused Superintendent Renwood's confidence to give place to deep concern, as he realized that the train with its hundreds of passengers was absolutely beyond human control—a mere plaything in the hands of Fate.

Truly, the situation was calculated to appall the stoutest heart. Richville was over twenty miles away, and the intervening track ran for the most part over a descending grade, as it wound gradually among the hills and thence down into the valley of Mad River, where the main line was reached. The train was already

running very swiftly, thanks to the energetic send-off given by the "Fleetwing" while under the outlaws' control. What, then, would be its probable velocity after plunging uninterruptedly over twenty miles of down grade? The prospect was appalling! Even now the speed was perceptibly increasing. The long line of cars lurched and jolted at an alarming rate. Would not the spinning wheels leap from the rails, and the ill-fated train go whirling down the steep embankment, hurling its passengers into a chaos of death and destruction?

The majority of the excursionists were for some time ignorant of their true predicament, being too jubilant at their escape from the robbers to comprehend that they had but jumped from the fryingpan into the fire. Some, even, were unaware that the locomotive was not still in its proper place at the head of the train; and, when the cars commenced to rock violently from side to side, some of the blissfully ignorant who had settled themselves down for a nap crossly expressed their private opinion of an engineer who would ignore the peace and comfort of his passengers in his own anxiety to get home.

But before many minutes had elapsed the would-be sleepers were awakened to a true sense of their position, and the knowledge was sufficient to speedily banish all thoughts of slumber from their minds. Indeed, as the moments flew by, and the velocity of the train steadily increased, the passengers became wrought to the highest pitch of excitement.

Superintendent Renwood was the coolest man on board in this time of peril, and he at once exerted himself to avert the panic that now seemed imminent among the affrighted excursionists. Hurrying from coach to coach, he urged the occupants to remain quietly in their seats, assuring them that no particular danger was to be feared.

"Only a few miles remain before reaching the heavy, adverse grades that are beyond," he declared. "Let us once reach that point, and the momentum of the train will soon be exhausted."

The cheering words and confident manner of the young superintendent served to quiet the passengers, and in a measure allayed their fears. However, Renwood's air of confidence was but assumed, to conceal from them his real anxiety. Inwardly he felt that it was indeed doubtful if the point so hopefully looked forward to would ever be reached. Running at such a tremendous speed, the cars were liable to jump the track at any moment.

It was with grave apprehensions that he retraced his steps to the forward coach, and mingled with a group of friends who stood by the door, anxiously observing the dizzy flight of the train, and making no attempt to disguise their increasing alarm.

President Melrose was the only man in the party who appeared wholly indifferent in the face of this awful danger. He sat with bowed head, too intent upon thoughts of his lost daughter to heed his own imminent peril.

What a thrilling spectacle it was—that guideless train, freighted with hundreds of helpless people, plunging madly on its dangerous way, rocking, swaying, lurching, scarcely seeming to touch the rails as it flew along, gaining increasing velocity with every passing moment!

High in the starlit heavens soared the moon, illuminating the earth with its tender radiance, dancing fantastically on the glistening rails, and bringing into sharp relief the many objects that sprung up along the way, seeming to mock the misery of the benighted travelers as they flitted past.

Within the brilliantly lighted cars, so recently the scene of mirth and revelry, how marked now was the change! The confidence inspired by Superintendent Renwood was of but brief duration; for as the speed of the train increased, so did the terror of the passengers. Children screamed in fright, ladies clung frantically to their escorts, while some swooned away, adding to the general excitement. Strong men sat with pale faces and bated breath, awed into silence by a sense of deadly danger, momentarily expecting to be plunged down the steep embankment to a horrible death.

They were banging upon the very verge of destruction; yet moment succeeded moment, and still the whirling wheels clung to the rails by little short of a miracle. Truly, it was an experience never to be forgotten by the participants, should they be so fortunate as to survive that wild night's ride.

But each passing minute, fraught with untold misery to the terror-stricken excursionists, was drawing them nearer to possible salvation. Superintendent Renwood was attentively watching

the train's swift progress, and presently his face brightened with rekindled hope.

"The worst is now over," he declared. "We have reached the end of the down grade, and the remaining distance to Richville is on a dead level; so, as we have managed to keep on the track thus far, there is little fear that we shall not continue to do so."

Those who were acquainted with the characteristics of the line knew that Renwood was correct in his calculations, and all breathed more freely in the belief that danger was in a large degree averted.

On rushed the train, showing as yet no abatement in velocity; and soon the lights of Richville were seen twinkling brightly in the distance.

"Humph! there's little prospect of stopping at the station, I imagine, judging by the way we are still flying along," grumbled one of the directors, in disgust.

"You will be greatly disappointed if you expect to do so," returned Ralph Renwood, smiling. "We shall bowl through the town at a lively rate, and probably will not come to a dead stop until after encountering the rising grade that exists several miles beyond."

"And then, barring further accidents, I suppose we may expect to reach our homes in time for an early breakfast. Oh, this is an enjoyable pleasure-trip and no mistake!" growled the other, surlily; for now that safety seemed assured, he lost no time in relieving his overcharged feelings.

The Belmont Branch connected with the main line at a point several hundred yards from the Richville station; and as the train rapidly drew nearer, those on board were seized with a sudden apprehension lest the switch should not be set so as to allow their passage onto the main line. True, there was a night switchman who should be on the lookout for the returning excursion-train; but it was possible that he had forgotten it amid the pressure of numerous other duties.

Happily the fears of the party in this case proved ill-founded, for the gleaming red light of the switchman was soon observed, marking the course of that worthy as he hastened toward the switch. He was a wide awake fellow, and was momentarily expecting the arrival of the overdue excursion-train; but when it at length appeared, engineless and running like the wind, there was no limit to his amazement. To comprehend the meaning of it all was utterly beyond his ken, but he understood that the train was uncontrollable, and immediately did the wisest thing possible under the trying circumstances—threw the switch and allowed the long line of cars to thunder past.

Once more the passengers breathed freely as they found themselves safely on the main line; but, alas! their exultance was of short duration. As they flashed through the sleeping town and out into the country again, Superintendent Renwood suddenly gripped the arm of his nearest companion, while his handsome face grew pale.

"My God! We are running straight into new peril!" he cried, excitedly.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"The Night Express, going west, is due at Richville at 1:40. It is now just half-past one," with a hasty glance at his watch. "In ten minutes that train will be here, and we—are directly in its path!"

"Heavens! Is there no way to avert the impending collision? Have we escaped manifold dangers only to meet death from an unexpected source?"

"Alas! I see no way to avoid the meeting, unless, by some good fortune, the Express has been delayed. Only let it be a few minutes behind time, and we can save our train. I fervently hope such will prove to be the case."

But at that very instant, as if to mock the hopes of the speaker, a sound was heard that fell like a death-knell on the ears of the passengers. It was the weird, far-away whistle of the Night Express!

CHAPTER IX.

THE RAILROAD PARDS.

WHILE the masterless excursion-train was rushing on to seeming destruction, another wild race was taking place over the same course and under scarcely less thrilling circumstances.

A ponderous locomotive was flashing over the iron, like some huge fire-breathing monster, its great headlight flaring, its drive-wheels revolving like lightning, its entire frame quivering with the pent-up energy that was within—frightening night-birds into flight with its screeching whistle, and sending a shower of sparks in its wake as it fairly flew along.

Side by side in the swaying cab, with eyes

fixed eagerly upon the track ahead, two men stood like figures of stone. The light that shone through the open fire-box door illuminated their smoke-begrimed and dust-stained faces, and at the same time revealed the look of firm resolve that was plainly written thereon.

Theirs was a self-appointed mission, and its object was the preservation of hundreds of precious lives believed to be at that moment in imminent peril. Would they succeed? The excursion-train had fully twenty minutes' start, and this was a time when every moment was of priceless value.

However, the railroad pards entertained hopes that the excursionists had contrived to stop their train, or at least reduced its speed beyond possibility of danger. Of course they were quite unaware that the brakes of the cars had been tampered with and rendered useless, else they would not have for an instant cherished such an idea. In absence of such knowledge, they half expected every turn in the road would bring the looked-for train into sight, and this in a measure hampered their progress, for Headlight Harry dared not run fast around the frequent curves lest a collision should be the result. So the "Fleetwing" was kept at a much lower speed than would have been the case had the engineer been sure of the train's exact whereabouts.

Nevertheless, by putting on extra bursts of speed whenever a straight stretch of track was encountered, this disadvantage was in some degree atoned for, and mile after mile was rapidly left behind.

"I say, Rufe," exclaimed the engineer to his companion, as they rushed along, "you have never explained the mystery of your presence on the roof of this cab a short time since. I am curious to learn how you contrived to escape from the hands of the Philistines, and come so opportunely to my rescue. This is a favorable time for you to vouchsafe a few words of enlightenment."

"Well, pard, I reckon it's a yarn that won't take long to tell," returned the young fireman. "Ye see, I was a-standin' in the cab here, when the first thing I knew I didn't know nothin'. It was a stunnin' clip on the back o' the head that laid me out, I expect, for when I opened my eyes ag'in, my noddle-box felt as if it had just run against the bizzness end of a mule. The old engine and everything on it seemed to be whirlin' round like a top, and it was some time before I could make out just how matters stood. Finally, I discovered you stretched out on the floor, with two blamed galoots in masks bending over you, in the act of tying you hand and foot with stout cords. You were even worse hit than I was, I reckon, for you had not yet recovered consciousness; but I knew by the precautions them fellers were takin' that you were alive and expected to come to most any minnit. Well, I had no doubt that the outlaws were intending to perform a like service for me, so I instantly determined to save 'em the bother, not bankerin' particularly for sich an unpleasant situation.

"I rolled over, jumped to my feet, an' before the astonished robbers could lift a finger to prevent, I vanished from their sight like a beautiful vision. The 'Fleetwing' was runnin' very slowly, then, else I probably wouldn't be here to tell the story, for I jumped without the least idea of where I was goin' to land, or whether I would strike on my head or my feet. As it was, I rolled down the bank like a barrel rollin' down hill, tearin' up the gravel at a great rate, an' finally bringin' up all in a heap at the bottom. After spendin' several minutes pullin' myself together an' breathin' in a fresh supply of wind, which same had been well nigh knocked outer me, I crawled to the top of the embankment an' looked 'round for the train.

"It had come to a stop a few hundred yards away, and, bein' by no means inclined to desert my friends, I immediately burried in that direction. Skulkin' along in the dense bushes that fringed the way, I was soon 'longside the train, to find it entirely in the hands of the outlaws, who were just then goin' through the passengers after the most approved fashion. Thinkin' that in the general confusion I might get a chance to set you at liberty, I sneaked up beside the engine, but was disappointed to find the two outlaws still there and on the alert. As I crouched there in the darkness and closely watched the scoundrels, I was strongly tempted to spring into the cab an' tackle 'em, single-handed, despite the fact that they were armed to the teeth; but a moment of reflection convinced me that such a move would be disastrous. So I waited an' waited, vainly hopin' the fellers would leave the engine, until finally

they commenced to shift the train about. Then convinced that the infernal skunks were up to some dirty trick, and determined to stick as close to you as possible until a favorable moment for action arrived, I crept over the side of the tender, fortunately without detection. Seizing the first opportunity, I made my way from there to the roof of the cab, which, under the circumstances, I considered the safest place of concealment. There I remained until the train-robbers sent the 'Fleetwing' off at full speed to meet the second section of the excursion, carrying you with it to what they planned to be a horrible fate.

"When Nick Norman an' his pards lit out, I allowed 'twas high time for me to come down from my lofty perch. So, down I come! I reckon Old Nick'll never cease to wonder how it was that his plans failed to materialize. Ha, ha!"

Rufe Ruffle chuckled gleefully as he pictured the probable discomfiture of the outlaws when they found their diabolical scheme had miscarried. He was joined by Headlight Harry, who had remained an attentive listener to his friend's lively narrative, though never for an instant allowing his gaze to wander from the track ahead.

"Rufe, you are a jewel!" exclaimed the young engineer, warmly. "But for your courage and promptitude, Nick Norman's vile machinations would have surely succeeded, and a horrible catastrophe involving the lives of hundreds of people would have been the inevitable result. As for my humble self, bearing the very brunt of the shock, I imagine there would have been scarcely enough left to warrant the holding of funeral services."

"Oh, come off, now! Don't be making out that I've done anything remarkable, 'cause I havn't. What I done was easy enuff, an' might be expected from any durn fool under similar circumstances. But I say, Harry," went on Rufe Ruffle, earnestly, "there's nothin' in the world that I wouldn't do, no danger under the sun that I wouldn't brave in your behalf. We are called the railroad pards, an' by Jerusalem! we'll stick to each other through thick and thin. Ain't that the way to talk pard?"

"Spoken like the brave, fearless fellow you are, Rufe!" cried Headlight Harry, his eyes glistening with a suspicious moisture. "You are indeed a friend to be relied upon to the very last. Give me your hand, pard!"

The hands of the gallant railroad boys met in a hearty clasp. Long and constant companionship, with a mutual sharing of the joys and sorrows, the toil and danger of their eventful lives, had drawn them together in bonds of friendship that death alone could sever.

"Well, pard," said the fireman, after a brief pause, "the 'Fleetwing' is makin' pretty good time, but we don't seem to get much closer to the train. I expected to catch sight of it some time ago, but somehow or other my expectations don't seem to pan out worth a cent."

"For which there can be but one explanation, I fear," returned Headlight Harry, dubiously.

"There are plenty of brave and experienced railroad men aboard the train, and I was confident they would soon bring it to a stop, provided as they are with excellent hand brake; but the fact that we have not already overtaken them is proof enough, to my mind, that the brakes have failed to work, and consequently the train is now running beyond control."

"In that case, then, they cannot stop until after striking the heavy grade beyond Richville."

I have serious doubts if they ever reach Richville, for the chances are that the cars will jump the iron and bring up in a heap at the foot of the embankment."

"Great Scott! I hope it won't be so bad as that. But I say, pard, even if the train sticks to the rails, there is danger of running into an open switch at Richville station, in which case things would be scattered round rather promiscuously."

"You are right, Rufe; and, what's worse yet, even should the excursionists escape the peril you mention and reach the main line in safety, it will be only to face difficulties of an equally serious nature," exclaimed the young engineer, impressively.

"What d'ye mean, pard?"

"Wby, man, the Night Express running west is due at Richville at 1:40, and it now lacks but twenty-five minutes of that time. Unless I am entirely wrong in my calculations, the excursion-train will pass Richville station just in time to collide with the Express."

Rufe Ruffle stood aghast as this new phase of the situation was revealed to him.

"Skin my cat, if this ain't a pretty fix!" he ejaculated. "Them excursion folks seem to be in a box, no matter how ye kin fix it. They kin think 'emselves durn lucky if they get off with whole hides."

"They are, indeed, in imminent peril, and I fear lives will be sacrificed ere this wild night's work is ended. However, there is a slight chance left to save them, if we can get speed enough out of the 'Fleetwing' to overtake the train before it passes Richville."

"An' to do that'll require more energy than the ole gal has ever shown yet, I reckon. Howsumever, there's no tellin' what she may do when pushed to it."

"The 'Fleetwing' is one of the very best machines on the road to-day," asserted Headlight Harry, enthusiastically. "She has never been required to show her full powers yet. This is a good time to demonstrate her running qualities."

He had increased the speed of his engine immediately upon reaching the conclusion that there was no longer any probability of finding the train at a standstill. True, there was still a chance that such might prove to be the case, but so slight was it that the engineer felt justified in taking the risk. The "Fleetwing" was now tearing over the irons at a wonderful rate, and every revolution of the huge driving-wheels served to increase her velocity.

But the railroad pards wore grave faces as they considered the enormity of the task which they had set themselves to perform.

"Here's Clark's Siding!" cried Rufe Ruffle, as the locomotive clattered over a switch. "Just nineteen miles to Richville depot! How much time have we left, pard?"

"A trifle over twenty minutes."

"That means, then, to beat the Express we must maintain an average speed of almost a mile a minute."

"Exactly, Rufe; and I'm confident the feat can be accomplished. Keep her well fired-up, pard, and I'll wager the old machine'll prove equal to the emergency."

"But how about the train? There's no tellin' how many miles ahead it may be," persisted the fireman. "We may succeed in gettin' to Richville in less than twenty minutes, but still be unable to overtake the train."

"Then the latter must be running at a speed far exceeding my calculations. Of course we don't know how much of a lead the train possesses, nor can we determine its present rate of progress; still we can make a pretty accurate estimate of both."

"How?"

"Well, when we started in pursuit of the train we were not more than twenty minutes behind. Of course their speed was but moderate at first, while ours has been quite fast, so it is safe to presume that at the present moment we have reduced the lead to ten minutes."

"That's quite likely, I reckon," assented Rufe.

"Now for their present rate of progress," the young engineer went on. "Over this descending grade the train may be running forty miles an hour, though I think we might safely call it several miles less. However, we will say that the train's ten minute lead is equivalent to not more than six miles. Now, figuring our own speed at sixty miles an hour, we are running three miles to less than two for the train, and at that rate will certainly win the race."

Rufe Ruffle remained silent for several moments, scratching his head thoughtfully.

"Seems to me, pard," he at length exclaimed, "your figurin' don't allow much margin in case of a possible miscalculation. Seein' your estimate is based entirely on supposition, let's do a little more s'posin'. Sposin' the train is a mile or two further in advance than you reckoned on, or s'posin' it's runnin' a little faster than expected, —wouldn't that knock your calculations into smithereens, hey?"

Headlight Harry smiled faintly, not at all disconcerted by his comrade's argument.

"I think I have over-estimated rather than under-estimated the progress of the train," he returned, confidently. "However, I mean to guard against the possibility you have just suggested."

"In what way?"

"Why, by getting as much speed as possible out of the 'Fleetwing' above the sixty miles an hour that I counted upon. If I can coax the machine up to sixty-five or seventy, the result of this race will soon be a dead certainty."

"Seventy miles an hour!" cried the fireman, in amazement. "Why, pard, you must be crazy to think of it!"

"Oh, no, Rufe! Not crazy, but simply resolved to save that train at all hazards. I'll run the

'Fleetwing' to her utmost capacity, if necessary, but the excursionists must be—shall be—overtaken!"

"Unless we jump the track, ourselves, an' bring up in Kingdom Come," retorted Rufe Ruffle, grimly, as he turned to replenish the seething fires of the madly rushing iron-horse.

CHAPTER X. TO THE RESCUE.

On, on, like a blazing meteor sped that lone engine through the moonlit night—trembling, throbbing, swayin', lurching—every inch of its massive frame endowed with life and energy as it flew along in obedience to the will of its resolute master, entering with seemingly human zeal and intelligence upon a race that was destined to eclipse all previous performances in local railway history. Away, away with a velocity that increased with every fleeting moment, plunging into a darksome forest here, flashing across a moonlit meadow there, darting through rock-bound ravines, thundering over lofty bridges—on, on, with rattle and clatter and rumble and roar, awaking weird echoes among the neighboring hills as it rushed, unrestrained, on its mad career.

To the brave railroad pards who were voluntary participants in that exciting ride, it was an experience that time could never efface from memory. It would, indeed, be a difficult task to depict their varied sensations at finding themselves borne along at a speed that almost took their breath away, and half-expecting each moment to be hurled down the steep embankment to certain destruction; yet, in that hour of peril, the hope of saving the excursion-train rose paramount to all thoughts of personal safety.

Great as must have been their anxiety, not unmixed with fear, as to the outcome of that desperate undertaking, there was naught in their stern, resolute faces to betray it. Rufe Ruffle worked like a beaver to replenish the seething, roaring fires that glowed within the heart of the speeding iron-horse, performing his arduous task with as much coolness as if "firing up" for an ordinary run; while Headlight Harry stood like a carven image, one hand resting on the throttle lever, as through the narrow window in front he looked wistfully for the light of the runaway train. Suddenly, however, he turned and beckoned the industrious fireman to come nearer.

"Rufus, old fellow, we are making good time," he exclaimed, complacently.

"Humph! It don't need no oracle to tell that, I reckon," retorted Rufe, as just then the engine swung round a sharp curve with a lurch that caused the occupants of the cab to come together with no little force.

"The 'Fleetwing' is doing herself proud, and no mistake. I had no idea the old girl could kick up her heels so lively. How fast d'ye think we are travellin', Rufe?"

"Dunno. I'd give a dollar to know, though."

"Then the dollar is mine; for I can soon tell, with a little assistance from you. Just clap your weather eye upon that line of telegraph-poles and begin to count them when I say the word. Understand?"

"I catch the ijee," returned Rufe Ruffle, and he immediately took up a favorable position while the engineer consulted his watch.

"Ready, now! Begin!" cried Headlight Harry; and then the fireman entered upon the task of enumerating the poles as they flew by. Thanks to the radiant moonlight, objects near the track could be distinctly seen, yet, so terrific was the speed of the engine that Rufe found his mental powers severely taxed to keep up with the endless procession of gaunt, bare poles that danced past in bewildering succession.

"Time's up!" Headlight Harry announced, finally, much to his companion's relief. "How many poles did you make?"

"A hundred an' ninety-eight, though I reckon I must 'a' skipped a few they went by so pesky fast."

"One hundred and ninety-eight poles in three minutes. That's the first point in our calculations. Now, those posts are supposed to be one hundred feet apart, or, fifty-two and eight-tenths to a mile; so, then, the hundred and ninety-eight poles just passed represent a distance of three and three-quarters miles. Figuring on that basis we are now slipping over the irons at the rate of—let's see—Great Caesar! Seventy-five miles an hour! How does that strike you, pard?"

Rufe Ruffle stood open-mouthed, quite dumfounded at the result of his comrade's calculations.

"Seventy-five miles an hour!" he ejaculated, at length recovering the use of his tongue. "Impossible! Why, pard, ye must be a leetle off in your reckonin'!"

"Well, then, figure it yourself."

"No; I'll take your word for it, pard. I don't keepr to rassle with figgers. But who'd a' thought the 'Fleetwing' could cut up such a caper, when the best we ever run her before was under forty-five. Seventy-five miles an hour? Gee-whillikins! The very thought of it makes me dizzy!"

"I am scarcely less astonished myself, pard," averred the young engineer. "We are making much better progress than I anticipated; yet, it seems, not enough to overtake the train. The latter, too, must be running considerably faster than we at first calculated upon, else we would have overhauled them long ago at this terrific pace."

"We're now only five miles from Richville, an' still—Hello! There she is at last, or I'm a Hindu!" yelled Rufe Ruffle, suddenly, as he pointed with eager finger down the line.

There, sure enough, could be seen the twinkling lights of the runaway train, only a brief glimpse of

which was to be had, however, ere it disappeared around a turn in the track. But that glimpse was sufficient to inspire the would-be rescuers with renewed hope and courage, which was strengthened a minute later when, on coming once more in sight of the train, they saw that the intervening distance was steadily decreasing.

"Hooray! We're on a dead level now, an' gainin' fast. We'll catch 'em, sure, unless we bu'st our b'iler," cried the fireman, jubilantly.

On rolled the masterless train, and on, still faster, thundered the lone engine in pursuit. The latter was gaining perceptibly, now, and when the long line of cars rattled over the switch upon the main line, the railroad pards were only a few hundred yards behind.

Headlight Harry glanced anxiously at his watch as they flashed by Richville station.

"Almost time for the Express," he exclaimed. "I hope she is late to-night."

"Then you'll hope in vain, for there she is, right on time as usual," cried Rufe Ruffle, whose quick ear caught a distant whistle even above the roar and rattle of the speeding engine.

"It will be a close shave, but I think we can get there," and the engineer's blue eyes flashed with a determined fire. "Sound your whistle, Rufe, and let them know that help is near!"

Rushing madly on to what seemed sure destruction, the terrified excursionists were suddenly electrified by hearing a series of short, quick, ear-splitting whistles in the rear. Their astonishment was equaled only by their delight at beholding the "Fleetwing" so close behind. Quickly the glad intelligence spread from car to car until it reached the president's coach. Superintendent Renwood was burried to the rear, followed by a throng of excited companions.

Meantime, the brave fellows on the locomotive were preparing for further action.

"There's but one thing to be done," declared Headlight Harry, as they rapidly drew nearer. "Rufe, you take care of the machine, while I—"

"Better let me go, pard!" interposed the fireman, instantly divining his comrade's intentions. But too late! The engineer had already crept through the narrow window and entered upon his perilous journey.

Along the running-board he glided, clinging tenaciously to the hand-rail as he went. Thence, by a series of agile movements he made his way to the pilot.

The appearance of the daring engineer was the signal for a hearty burst of applause from the eager, excited men who crowded upon the rear platform of the train, now scarcely a hundred yards in advance. Breathlessly they watched and waited, realizing that the safety of all on board depended upon the efforts of that intrepid youth who perched precariously on the pilot of the flying locomotive.

On rushed the "Fleetwing," gaining rapidly; foot by foot the intervening gap was lessened. Headlight Harry knelt at the very edge of the platform, while with both hands he poised the ponderous coupling-bar. Superintendent Renwood stood with coupling-pin in hand, ready to complete the connection.

Nearer—nearer, until the great bar slipped into its place, to be quickly secured, and the runaway train was a captive at last!

Rufe Ruffle, ever on the alert, instantly shut off steam and reversed the engine; but the task of bringing that swiftly-running train to a standstill was no easy one, and it was a question if it could be accomplished after all in time to avoid a collision.

Fortunately, the engineer of the approaching Express was quick to see the danger, and lost no time in exerting himself to save his own train from destruction. As a result, though the two trains actually came together, it was with greatly diminished speed, and the passengers escaped with nothing worse than a severe shaking up.

The joy of the excursionists knew no bounds when it was realized that danger no longer menaced them. Headlight Harry and Rufe Ruffle suddenly found themselves assailed by hundreds of admiring passengers, all eager to express their gratitude and grasp the hands of the brave fellows whose wondrous courage and daring had wrought their salvation.

The first man to reach the cab of the "Fleetwing" was Superintendent Ralph Renwood. He advanced with extended hand to greet his old-time comrade, Headlight Harry.

"Harry, my boy, you and Rufe Ruffle have added a big feather to your caps, to-night," he exclaimed. "This is, indeed, a glorious performance, and one that a grateful company will not be likely to forget."

For a few minutes the arms of the railroad pards flew like pump-handles, but they passed through the hand-shaking ordeal unflinchingly, and, when at length order was restored, the trains quickly proceeded back to Richville.

There the excursionists left the cars and dispersed to their various homes; but, though worn and weary, it is safe to assert that sleep visited the eyes of but few the remainder of that eventful night, haunted as they were by memories of the trying scenes through which they had so recently passed.

CHAPTER XI.

PREPARING FOR PURSUIT.

The day that witnessed the opening of the Belmont Branch, and the disastrous sequel to that brilliant celebration, as related in the previous chapter, was followed by another equally as eventful. Although it was the holy Sabbath, a day closely observed by devout and law-abiding Richvillians, this particular occasion proved a noteworthy excep-

tion to the rule. The streets of the town presented a striking contrast to their usual quiet appearance, being thronged at an early hour by hundreds of excited citizens, among whom the sole topic of conversation was the stirring events of the previous night.

The high-handed outrages perpetrated by the marauders led by Nick Norman immediately provoked a storm of indignation on every hand; for, while Richville had seen no little of crime and outlawry during its eventful history, this latest exploit eclipsed everything on record in point of audacity.

On all sides could be heard vows of vengeance against the dastardly road-robbers, and there was an outspoken determination to proceed at once against them, interest perhaps being considerable stimulated by the huge poster that soon appeared upon the door of the Town Hall, bearing the following announcement in freshly-painted letters at least a foot high:

"\$10,000 REWARD!!!

"The above-named sum will be paid by the R. & S. R. R. Co. for the capture of the parties implicated in last night's robbery on the Belmont Branch.

"(Signed)

MAURICE MELROSE,
"President."

This interesting notice was supplemented by another, signed by Maurice Melrose, personally, offering an additional reward of \$5,000 for the recovery of his missing daughter.

These promised rewards, aggregating the handsome sum of \$15,000, were well calculated to stimulate public zeal, and the work of organizing a strong party to search for the outlaws was immediately begun.

But, while the usual Sabbath calm was being broken by the tramp of heavy feet, and the confused cries of excited men, hastening from every direction to join the pursuing party, other events of equal importance were transpiring in another portion of the town.

It was a noticeable fact that, amid the general confusion both Headlight Harry and his right bower, Rufus Ruffle, were conspicuous for their absence. However, the railroad pards, far from being idle, were busily engaged in the promulgation of a little scheme of their own.

The reader will remember that, when Nick Norman's gang unsuccessfully attempted to recapture the "Fleetwing," one of their number, Sneaky Sam, fell into the hands of their plucky opponents. This candidate for the sheriff's halter, after being securely bound, was bundled into the tender, where he lay quite forgotten by the railroad pards during the stirring scenes that immediately succeeded his capture.

However, when the long, exciting chase was ended, and the rescued passengers were dispersing to their several homes, Headlight Harry's thoughts reverted to his prisoner. With characteristic shrewdness he omitted to mention the capture of Sneaky Sam, having already resolved upon a method of obtaining the wealth of information that he believed to be locked within the breast of that individual.

So the crowd gradually dispersed, quite oblivious of the fact that a full-fledged train-robbber, mask, weapons and all, was in their very midst; and, after seeing the "Fleetwing" safely housed, the railroad pards held a brief consultation to determine how to dispose of their captive.

It was resolved to convey him to the home of Rufe Ruffle, which was only a short distance away; and, accordingly, Sneaky Sam was lifted unceremoniously between them and carried from the roundhouse into the dark, unfrequented street leading to the fireman's humble habitation. The journey was made without attracting attention, and the captive outlaw was conveyed up-stairs to Rufe's own room, without awaking the latter's parents, who were not only old and deaf, but remarkably sound sleepers.

After assuring themselves that the ruffian was secured beyond the slightest possibility of escape, the railroad pards threw themselves down to scratch a few hours' of much needed rest. They were astir at an early hour, however, foregoing for once the extra morning nap that was usually one of the most enjoyable features of their weekly holiday.

Sneaky Sam was apparently fast asleep, judging by the sonorous snores that emanated from his vicinity; but when Rufe Ruffle grasped the water-pitcher and poured a few drops down the sleeper's neck, it had the effect of arousing him instantly. His dark eyes glittered wickedly as he regarded his captors, while a muttered oath escaped his lips.

Headlight Harry, looking into the brutal, villainous face of the prisoner, felt that he had indeed an unpromising subject to work upon; but he hoped to bring the fellow to terms, and lost no time in coming to the point.

"Well, my fine fellow, what do you think of your present situation? Is it not a delightful one?" he interrogated, by way of opening conversation. Then, having received no reply other than a sullen scowl, he immediately went on:

"It is needless to remind you of the fact that you are now a helpless prisoner; and I suppose you are sharp enough to surmise that we have not taken the trouble to bring you here without having a definite object in view. Now, I propose to come to the point without useless palaver, and it will be well for you to listen attentively to what I have to say.

"Let me say, to begin, that I know you, Sneaky Sam—and there are few who do not—as a cowardly scoundrel, capable of all sorts of petty crimes and misdemeanors, from robbing a hen-roost to picking a blind man's pocket. Such has been your past record; and now, to cap the climax, you appear as

one of a band of train-robbers, and are caught, red-handed, in your acts of outlawry. Now, your latest exploit is known only to myself and pard; but if I should reveal the truth to the clamoring populace outside, what do you think would be the result, Sneaky Sam? Not a slight fine or a few months' sentence, this time, I'll be bound. There would be a first-class necktie party held within ten minutes, in which you would be the center of attraction. How does that prospect strike you, friend Samuel?"

The prostrate ruffian's face had visibly turned pale, and it was evident that the picture drawn by his captor was by no means pleasing to him.

"I s'pose ye'll turn me over to the plice," he exclaimed, sullenly. "Ye've got me dead to rights, an' I reckon my goose is cooked this time, sure!"

"Well, my gay and festive robber, it depends altogether upon yourself whether you ever again breathe the sweet air of liberty," returned the engineer, coolly. "As I said before, no one knows of your capture; so, if I choose to let you go free, what is there to hinder?"

"An' will ye do that, boss?" asked Sneaky Sam, hopefully.

"On one condition, yes. You must make a clean breast of your connection with Nick Norman's band, and give us full directions how to reach the headquarters of the gang; also, any other information you may possess which will be of service to us in our efforts against them. Do this, and you shall go free immediately after I prove the truth of your statements. What say you?"

"If I refuse to betray the gang—what then?"

"Then I shall hand you over to the authorities without delay," answered Headlight Harry, sternly. "Comet Time is too precious to waste, Sneaky Sam! I'll give you just five minutes to decide which course you will take."

For a few moments Sneaky Sam was silent, during which time his captors regarded him complacently, having having little doubt what his final determination would be. They had already sized the ruffian up as a fellow who would have little compunction about betraying his partners in crime, if by so doing his personal safety was assured; and the sequel proved their estimate to be correct.

"Wal, pard, seein' ya have me cornered, I s'pose I might's well give up the game," declared the prisoner, even before the allotted five minutes had expired. "I reckon there's no law to prevent a feller blowin' on his gang to save his own hide; an' so I'll give ye the hull story, trustin' ye'll use me square in return."

"A very sensible resolution, Samuel. Now, proceed as briefly as possible, and tell us what you know of Nick Norman's band. Speak truthfully, and rest assured I will do as I agreed."

"What I know about the gang can easily be told, I reckon. It seems that Nick Norman has been livin' in seclusion for a long time, somewhere up in the mountains—I don't know just where. Wal, he heard of the big excursion to be run at the openin' of the Belmont Branch, so he laid his plans to capture the train, thinkin' to make a big haul of boodle. He set to work to organize a band for that purpose; an' when one of his men came to me an' said as how a rich pile coul' be mad, by a few hours' work, I was durn fool enough to join the gang. I didn't know jest what the job was to be until the time came for work; then I got scared an' would a' backed out if the prospect for plunder hadn't be'n so mighty big. Along I went with the crowd, an' as a result here I am—in the soup!"

"You are, perhaps, better off than your late comrade will be a few hours hence," declared Headlight Harry, significantly. "Now, where can the band be found? Where is their rendezvous? In some inaccessible spot among the mountains, I presume."

"Wal, I don't know of any reg'lar retreat, an' don't believe there is any," answered Sneaky Sam, promptly. "Ye see, the band was organized expressly for this partic'lar occasion, bein' made up largely of miners from the various camps 'twixt here an' Belmont; an' they will probably disband immediately after dividing the plunder. We met yesterday at a point three miles from Silver Creek, an' the understandin' was that we should return there when the job was done; so I expect the gang is there about this time, fightin' over a division o' the spoils. If you want to see 'em very bad, you had better make haste afore the gang is scattered in every direction."

"A good suggestion which shall be promptly acted upon, Sneaky Sam. We will seek the ruffians without delay, and you shall be the man to guide us to the spot where they are supposed to hold forth."

"Come, Rufe! Let's leave this penitent sinner to his own reflections for a short time, while we look after a few friends who are anxious to try their luck at outlaw-hunting."

The railroad pards were in the street a few moments later, leaving their crestfallen prisoner, still bound hand and foot, to await their return.

"Do ye take any stock in Sneaky Sam's confession?" inquired Rufe Ruffle, as they hurried along.

"Mebbe the durn skunk is givin' us a wrong steer. No; the fellow is too thoroughly scared, I think, to attempt any treachery. He realizes he is wholly at our mercy, and, relying upon my promise to set him free, has doubtless told the whole truth."

"Well, what's the next move, pard?"

"To raise a party of men fit to cope with the outlaws. Ye see, there will be a grand rush to win the reward that the company has offered. Hundreds of men will go tramping into the hills in quest of Nick Norman's gang, with far more enthusiasm than caution, and the probable result will be that the outlaws will scent their coming and quietly fit away, leaving their pursuers to roam the hills over to their hearts' content. Now, if we can get the

start of this expedition, knowing as we do the probable location of the robbers (that is, allowing Sneaky Sam's story is true), we stand an excellent show of surprising the gang and effecting its capture."

"An' also of pocketin' a snug little reward," supplemented the fireman, with an anticipative grin.

"Oh, bother the reward! You can have my share if we succeed," returned Headlight Harry, impatiently. "If I can bring about the capture of Nick Norman's band and restore the president's daughter to her home, the knowledge of a good deed well done will be ample reward for me. Now, I would like to set my eyes on Roy Noble, the Express-messenger, about this time. He is a brave fellow, and just the one to join us in this enterprise, for he's dead in love with Mabel Melrose and doubtless is worrying himself to death about her."

"Speak of the devil an' he's sure to look over your shoulder," cried Rufe Ruffle, as at that very moment a young man rushed impetuously around the corner from a side street and collided violently with them.

He was a tall, handsome young fellow, and his face bore unmistakable marks of grief and anxiety.

"Hello, boys!" he saluted. "I'm hurrying to join the expedition which is soon to start in search of the train-robbers. I tell you the whole town is up in arms, and we'll have every one of the infernal scoundrels dangling from a limb before nightfall. Of course you'll join us?"

"Hardly, Roy, since we are about to organize a party of our own for a similar purpose. You must join us!" returned Headlight Harry, promptly; and then he briefly explained matters to the surprised listener.

The latter immediately saw the wisdom of his friends' scheme, and declared his readiness to join them. The next thing, now, was to enlist others in the enterprise, and to accomplish this in the quickest possible time the trio separated and went in different directions, each looking for brave, determined men who could be depended upon in an emergency.

Owing to the fact that Sunday trains were wholly dispensed with in that section there were plenty of idle railroad men to be found in Richville that day; and it was among them that the three young men directed their efforts. In a very few minutes over a score of stalwart fellows had signified their eagerness to follow the railroad pards on the venturesome expedition, all of them personally known to be the very embodiment of courage. Every man was well-armed and eager for the fray.

Having raised a formidable force without difficulty, it now remained to provide a means of transportation, to Silver Creek, fully twenty miles away. For this purpose it was decided to utilize hand cars, a number of which were to be found in an adjacent car-house.

"I understand that a special train will be provided to convey the other party to the point where the excursionists were stopped and robbed," explained Roy Noble. "It is their intention to strike the outlaws' trail and follow it up from that point."

"And as Nick Norman is actually located several miles from there, I calculate our friends will have a weary tramp before they come upon the object of their search," returned the engineer. "Meantime, with the advantage of knowing just where to look for the robbers, I hope to effect the capture of the entire gang, and thus have a grand laugh on our rivals who are quite oblivious of our intentions."

Thus sanguine of success, the outlaw-hunters made all possible haste to complete their preparations, and were soon ready for the start. So intensely was popular interest centered in the doings of the larger expedition that their own movements failed to attract attention; and the fact that the hand-cars to be used were kept some distance from the depot added materially to their chances of getting away without detection.

Scarcely more than an hour had elapsed since the confession of Sneaky Sam, when Headlight Harry's party departed silently from Richville, not forgetting to take along the captive robber, whose knowledge was relied upon to guide them to the presence of Nick Norman. To invade the latter's mountain haunts was an enterprise fraught with no little peril, as every man well knew; but this knowledge only strengthened their resolution to follow the trail to the bitter end, nor rest until the last of that rascally band was brought to justice.

CHAPTER XI.

A FAIR CAPTIVE.

It is now necessary to leave the outlaw hunters for a time, and follow the adventures of the fair girl whose mysterious disappearance had caused such grief and anxiety among her many relatives and friends.

During the time that the train-robbers were entertaining themselves at the expense of their victims, Mabel Melrose had stood surrounded by friends, sharing the general feeling of disgust and terror at being compelled to participate in so disagreeable a scene. Then, when the excursionists were finally at liberty to depart, she was one of the first to rush for her seat in the car.

At that moment, unfortunately, her foot caught against some obtrusive object, and she fell heavily to the earth. Before she could rise, the poor girl was trampled upon by the surging crowd behind, who were too excited and anxious for their own safety to observe her prostrate form or heed her feeble cry; while her own party, as already known, failed to discover her absence until the train was under way.

Stunned and bruised, though not seriously injured, Mabel lay for several moments upon the cold

ground; and when she finally regained her feet it was to find, much to her dismay, that the train was in motion. A cry of dismay escaped the young girl's lips, as she saw the twinkling lights of the cars vanish swiftly in the distance, and realized that she was separated from her friends.

Her cry was overheard by the outlaws, who were but a few paces away, and instantly the frightened girl found herself surrounded by a group of stalwart rustlers, who regarded her with curious eyes. Their redoubtable leader, Nick Norman, quickly pushed his way through the crowd.

"What's the rumpus here?" he gruffly demanded.

"What are ye all starin' at, anyhow?"

"A woman, captain, and a beauty," volunteered one of the robbers, with a leer.

"One o' the excursion crowd, I reckon, an' she's got left behind."

"Left behind, hey? Well, I can see that easy enuff without tellin', I reckon. Stand back, ye ill-mannered galoots, an' give me a chance to interview the lady."

So saying, the outlaw chief confronted the girl, who stood in mingled fear and trembling. He scanned her lovely face in surprise and admiration.

"So you got left, eh?" he bluntly exclaimed, at length.

"Well, that's mighty unfortunate, blame my eyes if it ain't. How'd it happen, anyhow?"

Summoning her courage with a supreme effort, Mabel with difficulty found words to explain, though her pale face and faltering voice fully betrayed her inward trepidation. Nick Norman still kept his eyes fixed attentively upon her.

"Pears to me your face seems mighty familiar, yet I can't just place ye," he said. "What is your name, miss, if I may ask?"

"Mabel Melrose!" was the timid reply.

"So! Any relation to old Melrose, the high-cock o' the railroad?"

"I am the daughter of Maurice Melrose, sir."

"The deuce you say!" cried the outlaw leader, with a sudden start, while an exultant gleam shot into his sly eyes.

"Here is a bit of rare good fortune that I little counted upon," the robber muttered with a gleeful chuckle. Then, after a moment, he again addressed the trembling maiden.

"So you're old Melrose's gal, eh? Well, I reckon the old man was mighty careless to leave ye in the lurch in this fashion. When he awakes to the fact that he has left his daughter in Nick Norman's distinguished company, as he doubtless will do about this time, the old reprobate will be tempted to kick himself for his stupidity. Well, what can't be cured must be endured," says the old saw; so you had better accept the situation with as good grace as possible."

"But, sir, how am I to reach my home?" faltered poor Mabel, appealingly.

"That's a riddle, and I give it up," laughed Nick Norman. "The train has departed, as you can see, and there is no other means of transportation that I am aware of."

"But there is another train—the second section of the excursion—which is now approachin'," persisted the girl. "Will you not signal the train and have me put on board?"

The outlaw leader laughed loud and long.

"It is a pity not to accommodate so fair a being, but really I must refuse to comply with your request for two excellent reasons. Firstly, the train you mention, unless my plans miscarry, will never reach this point. Secondly, the fact that you are Maurice Melrose's daughter makes it imperative that I should insist upon the pleasure of your company, for a time at least."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I will explain when I have more time. At present consider yourself the honored guest of Nick Norman, and rest assured that you are safe from all harm. Here, lieutenant!"

A tall, brawny fellow, the captain's right bower, was quickly at his leader's side.

"I will leave this young lady in your charge, for I must follow the boys to look after that train. Keep a sharp eye on her, and don't allow her to escape, for she is the railroad president's daughter, and is literally worth her weight in gold to us. Remember, sir, unless you produce this girl, unharmed, on my return, your life shall pay the forfeit."

"Your will is law, captain," returned the subaltern promptly. "The lady will be perfectly safe in my hands, never fear."

Poor Mabel! Picture her consternation at hearing the significant words of the outlaws, into whose power she had unwittingly fallen. Nick Norman's assurance that she was safe from injury, far from effecting its purpose, served rather to increase her alarm. As she looked around upon that desperate band of masked men, standing grim and ghostly in the moonlight, and realized how utterly helpless she was in their hands, far from home and loving friends, she was overcome by the horror of the situation and sunk to the ground in a deep swoon!

When pretty Mabel Melrose at last recovered consciousness, it was to marvel greatly at the change that had taken place in her surroundings.

No longer the dismal spot beside the railroad, which had been the scene of her misfortune. That vast, gloomy forest, the babbling stream with its moonlit waters, the masked outlaws flitting about like demons of the night—all had vanished; and in their place appeared a scene in such marked contrast that the astonished girl was fain to wonder by what magic the marvelous transformation was wrought.

It was broad daylight, now, and a tiny ray of sunshine kissed the fair face of the maiden as she opened her eyes and looked bewilderedly around her. She found herself lying upon a couch in a

corner of a room, through the single window of which gleamed the welcome sunlight. The apartment was of medium size, and plainly though comfortably furnished. The floor was thickly carpeted with handsome furs which formed a warm and luxurious covering, while the walls were similarly decorated, a huge curtain being suspended on one side evidently to separate the apartment from another.

All this Mabel Melrose observed at a single glance, and much remained to attract attention as she continued to take a mental inventory of the contents of the room. She noted that a little cracked looking-glass hung above the antiquated bureau that graced one corner, while numerous pictures, mostly cheap chromos and sitographs, adorned the walls. There were, too, a number of those nondescript articles, combining the useful with the ornamental, in the production of which ingenious woman takes a peculiar delight; and as Mabel, in surprise, observed these various details, it was with a growing belief that one of her own sex was the rightful occupant of the apartment into which she had been so mysteriously spirited. This opinion was strengthened, too, when she discovered a row of pegs in the opposite corner, upon which were hung sundry garments, about the sex of whose owner there could not be the slightest doubt.

Who was the fair unknown, and what was the location of this her humble home? Mabel Melrose found herself vainly seeking an answer to these questions, as she continued to gaze interestedly about the room. Desirous of learning as much as possible regarding her whereabouts, she arose from the couch, not without considerable difficulty, for she was faint and dizzy, and eagerly made her way to the narrow window.

The vista from this point was neither extensive nor inviting, merely revealing the fact that the building, which was a rough log cabin of considerable size, stood in a small clearing in the heart of the virgin forest. On three sides stretched an almost impenetrable wall of huge trees and tangled undergrowth, while on the remaining side arose a precipitous, vine-clad cliff, close to which the humble cabin nestled. A glimpse of blue sky overhead, enlivened by Old Sol's radiant face, formed the single pleasing feature of an otherwise dismal prospect.

Mabel Melrose turned from the window, by no means charmed by the view therefrom, and her gaze next rested upon the heavy curtain stretched across the room. What was on the other side? Not a sound could be heard, though she listened attentively. It was barely possible, she thought, that the cabin was temporarily deserted, in which case there was nothing to prevent her from fleeing from the gloomy place.

Inspired by vague hopes of escape, the young lady stepped resolutely across the room, resolved to penetrate the mysteries beyond. She pushed the curtain aside, and peered eagerly out, only to recoil with a cry of amazement at the sight which met her gaze.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OUTLAW'S DAUGHTER.

If Mabel Melrose expected to find the outer apartment deserted, and therefore make her way from the woodland cabin without molestation, a single glance sufficed to demonstrate the fallacy of her calculations. The room contained a single occupant, as Mabel instantly perceived; but, it was not the mere discovery of this fact alone that chained the fair intruder's gaze and wrung a startled exclamation from her lips, but rather the striking personal appearance of the stranger, which was, indeed, well calculated to excite surprise and admiration.

Imagine a girl of scarcely more than eighteen summers, just budding into the grace and beauty of perfect womanhood, of medium height, lithe and supple as the willow, with a queerly head crowned by a wreath of glossy black hair that fell in luxuriant ringlets about her milk-white neck and shoulders; a clear, oval face, every feature of which was as regular as though fashioned by a sculptor's hand; eyes black as sloes, sparkling with all the diamond's luster, and cheeks that glowed with the rosy bloom of health. Such is, in brief, a picture of the beautiful being with whom Mabel Melrose suddenly found herself face to face.

Afired in garments of coarse texture that fitted close to her splendid figure, revealing all its grace and symmetry, this fair nymph of the woods reclined at ease in a wooden rocker, idly caressing a pretty kitten that lay purring contentedly in the lap of its mistress. However, at sight of Mabel she immediately arose, and advanced with a smile that revealed two even rows of teeth of pearly whiteness.

"So you have awoken at last!" she exclaimed, in tones singularly clear and bell-like. "I was about to rouse you, fearing you were emulating Rip Van Winkle, when fortunately I was relieved at hearing you astir; so I decided to wait, well knowing that a woman's curiosity would soon tempt you to appear."

As Mabel Melrose stood in mute amazement, and stared fixedly at the speaker like one enchanted, noting her dazzling beauty, her cheerful words, her ringing laugh, she found it indeed difficult to believe the evidence of her own senses. That such a lovely being was to be found presiding over an humble log-cabin in the heart of the wilderness seemed almost incredible; yet, there she stood, a creature of veritable flesh and blood—a very queen of the woods! And as she looked upon the beautiful face, in which her own eyes were reflected nothing of deceit or guile, Mabel felt the fear that had hitherto possessed her in a measure disappear. Surely, reasoned the girl, there could be no great

danger to apprehend, if the angel in human shape who now stood before her was any criterion by which to judge her captors.

Obedient to a sudden impulse, the railroad magnate's daughter rushed forward and seized the hand of the beautiful stranger.

"Oh, tell me," she cried, impetuously, "where am I, and why have I been taken to this place? The last I remember I was standing in a lonely spot beside the railroad, surrounded by the terrible masked men who had robbed the train. My friends had proceeded homeward, leaving me behind unknowingly. Now I wake to find myself in this strange place. The interval has been an utter blank to me. Oh, please let me know the whole truth at once, and, if possible, relieve my anxiety!"

"Any explanation in my power will cheerfully be given. I assure you," was the pleasant response. "To come here, this is my father's humble home, and it was he who brought you here this morning at sunrise, that is to say several hours ago, for the day is now well advanced."

"And your father—who is he?"

"Men know him as Nick Norman. No doubt you have heard his name mentioned before," and a grim smile played about the mouth of the speaker. "He is quite a celebrated character in this section, I believe."

"What? Nick Norman, the outlaw—the fugitive from justice! And you—you are his daughter?"

"Yes; I am his daughter, Madge. Pray, is there anything remarkable in the fact?" returned the beauteous wood-nymph, laughing in evident amusement at the look of surprise and incredulity that appeared upon the face of Mabel Melrose at the announcement.

"There is, indeed, to my eyes at least," the latter promptly answered. "It seems scarcely credible that one so beautiful as yourself is the offspring of such a notorious wretch as this so-called Nick Norman enjoys the reputation of being."

"Nevertheless the fact remains; and I may add, since you have voiced the world's opinion of my father, that were he even ten times blacker than he is painted, my affection for him would not be lessened. He has always been a kind and loving father, whatever his faults may be, and though a merciless public has branded him criminal and outlaw, yet I glory none the less in the relationship."

The words poured in an impetuous torrent from Madge Norman's lips, while her black eyes flashed and her bosom heaved. Her listener could not fail to be impressed by this demonstration of the love borne by the lovely girl for her erring parent.

"Forgive me if I have offended you. I had no intention of hurting your feelings," Mabel hastened to say.

"Hurt my feelings, indeed! Have no fear of that, for I am used to hearing my father spoken of as an incarnation of all that is bad. Well knowing the general sentiment, I can by no means blame you for sparing it."

"I suppose, then, your father was concerned in the train-robbery last night," pursued Mabel, after a short pause.

"Most decidedly so; since it was he who planned the enterprise and pushed it to a successful completion. None but he would have had the nerve to undertake such a dangerous game."

"But why has he brought me to this dismal place? His thieving minions have already taken what valuables I possessed; and I fail to see what advantage can accrue to him by subjecting me to this treatment."

"Then you are by no means sharp or you would instantly perceive the motive," rejoined Madge Norman, with a knowing smile.

"I plead guilty to the charge of obtuseness, in this case at least. I am utterly in the dark, and must look to you for enlightenment."

"Which I am both able and willing to give, since my father has already revealed to me his intentions concerning you."

"Well?"

"Well, you are the daughter of Maurice Melrose, are you not?"

"I am."

"And that gentleman is extremely wealthy?"

"Yes."

"And he loves you dearly—fairly worships the ground you tread, I dare say?"

"He does, indeed!"

"Well, then, is not the rest clear to you? Your disappearance will doubtless cause your affectionate father no end of grief and anxiety; so, when he learns that you are still safe and sound and can be produced upon payment of a certain sum, he will not hesitate to loosen his purse-strings and thereby secure the safe return of his beloved daughter."

"Oh, indeed!"

"At least, such are my father's calculations, and he is a master-hand at scheming. When he learned that you were the child of that rich old nabob, Maurice Melrose, he was not slow to embrace the golden opportunity for pecuniary gain; and thus it is that you find yourself within the mountain home of Nick Norman, the outlaw."

"I comprehend his purpose, now, thanks to your explanation," Mabel Melrose exclaimed, somewhat relieved by the words of the outlaw's daughter. "I am to be held for ransom in true bandit fashion until such time as my father sees fit to pay the price demanded for my release. Very romantic, to be sure! Yet I may be pardoned, I think, if I prefer my own home to this dreary spot in the woods; so I hope my father will lose no time in coming to the rescue with the required sum."

"You need have no fears on that score, for I am greatly mistaken if Maurice Melrose wavers an instant with the welfare of his daughter at stake,

though the amount of ransom demanded will doubtless be considerable. However, you may expect to be at liberty in a few paws, at the most."

"In a few days?" echoed the fair prisoner, in blank dismay. "Am I to pass whole days and nights in this lonely place? Why, I would die of homesickness! The bare thought of it makes me shudder, I declare."

"How remarkably sensitive you are, to be sure," laughed Madge Norman, derisively. "This humble dwelling in the forest is of course far different from your own grand home; yet, I dare say, you can manage to survive a brief sojourn here without serious results."

"I am by no means anxious to try the experiment," declared Mabel, with suddenly rising courage. "I should like to know what is to prevent me from leaving this house at once, I will not tamely submit to such indignities."

She stepped resolutely toward the open door as she spoke, but with a sudden movement Madge barred her progress.

"What is to prevent you, indeed?" she cried with a mocking laugh. "Do you forget that I am here? Look at this!"

She suddenly flourished a gleaming revolver before the eyes of the startled girl, who recoiled with a cry of horror, losing all her new-born courage at sight of that deadly weapon.

"Don't be afraid!" admonished the outlaw's daughter, and the revolver disappeared as quickly as it had come. "I was merely demonstrating my ability to keep you a prisoner here, which I saw you were rather inclined to doubt."

"Would you join in detaining me against my will—you, a woman like myself?" earnestly pleaded Mabel, by no means pleased at the idea of spending an unknown period there in the heart of the wilderness.

"I am simply obeying orders, you know. My father bade me keep a close watch upon you and see that you do not leave this cabin, because his own interests demand your temporary detention. Therefore, it is my duty to see that his plans are carried out, and I shall do so to the best of my ability."

"Now, let me give you some sisterly advice," Madge continued, in softer tones. "You are probably convinced by this time that escape is impossible; so why not cheer up and make the best of the situation? The surroundings may be a trifle unpleasant to one of your pampered tastes, but you'll admit they might be a great deal worse. Let me assure you, first of all, that you are as safe here with me as though in your own house. The location of this cabin is a secret to all but father and I, and we are quite secure from intrusion. During your stay, which will be but brief, I shall consider you my honored guest, and shall do all within my humble power to make the time pass pleasantly. I hope you will appreciate my good intention and endeavor to reconcile yourself to the situation. You must admit that such is the wisest course to pursue under existing circumstances."

Mabel Melrose, listening in silence to the words of the woodland beauty, could not fail to be favorably impressed thereby. Though naturally vexed at the disagreeable situation in which she found herself, she was sensible enough to realize the folly of further opposition. She saw that it would be utterly impossible to escape from the cabin, guarded as she was by the vigilant young woman who was true as steel in her allegiance to Nick Norman; but at the same time Madge's frank, straightforward manner did much to reassure her that no personal danger was to be dreaded while she remained in her charge. "Well, since you are so anxious to entertain me as a guest, I suppose I must accept your hospitality," exclaimed Mabel, at last, "though I am free to say that it is from necessity, not from choice, that I remain beneath this roof, and I trust the arrangements for my release will be completed as soon as possible."

"Ah! I see you are becoming reconciled to the situation, which is very sensible to be sure. Perhaps, indeed, you may become so attached to your new quarters that you will exceedingly regret when the time draws near to depart," and Madge Norman laughed merrily.

"There is little probability of such a result, I assure you," the fair prisoner hastened to assert.

"Well, be that as it may, I shall devote myself none the less assiduously to your comfort. My first duty shall be to offer you refreshments, such as my scanty resources afford, for I know that many hours have elapsed since you last tasted food, and consequently you must be well-nigh famished. Indeed, you are looking pale and weary, and nothing can invigorate you so quickly as a cup of good, strong coffee, made by such experienced hands as mine. Come!"

Mabel needed no second bidding, being blessed with a vigorous appetite which even the excitement attending her recent adventures had failed to impair; so she permitted herself to be conducted to the rude deal table near by, while her self-appointed hostess hurried to place before her an array of dishes which, if not elaborate, were at least plentiful and appetizing.

"I will not apologize for the lack of silver-ware, table-linen, and so forth, since you can scarcely expect a fugitive outlaw, whose home is a rude hut in the heart of the wilderness, to be the proud possessor of such luxuries," said Madge, lightly. "However, here are eatables in abundance, and, unless your stomach is so fastidious as to rebel at the quality, I see nothing to prevent you from pitching in."

And the hungry girl did "pitch in" with a relish, finding the coffee delicious and the food well cook-

ed and appetizing. As she ate she also found opportunity to note all the details of her new surroundings.

She saw that the room in which she now sat was considerably larger than the first, and evidently served the double purpose of living-room and kitchen. Its furniture was scanty, consisting of little besides a stove, a table and a few chairs. The walls were hung with furs, which also carpeted the earthen floor, lending an air of warmth and comfort to the rude apartment. One corner contained a couch, which was doubtless occupied by Nick Norman whenever that worthy chanced to be at home.

What interested Mabel Melrose most of all, however, was the fair mistress of this isolated abode, who now flitted lightly about the room engaged in various household duties. Long ago had she heard of the notorious outlaw and his turbulent career—heard, too, of the motherless daughter whose home was with distant relatives, honest, well-to-do people who were affording her every opportunity for culture and learning, when suddenly her mysterious disappearance, simultaneous with the flight of her miscreant father, set the neighborhood agog with excitement. Little did she imagine when thinking of Margaret Norman, whose whereabouts were from that hour clothed in impenetrable mystery, that she was one day destined to meet the outlaw's daughter, and that too under such peculiar circumstances.

The fact that this beautiful and accomplished girl had voluntarily left a pleasant home and loving friends to become the companion of a reckless criminal, on whose head a price was set, to share his solitary life beset by perils and hardships innumerable, to pass her days there on the dreary mountain-side, far from civilization, solicitous only for his comfort and safety—was this not touching evidence of a daughter's love and devotion?

Each succeeding moment found Mabel Melrose more deeply interested in the beautiful being whose acquaintance she had made in so remarkable a manner. Indeed, there was a charm and novelty in the situation that was not without its effect upon the romantically-inclined girl, whose own fears and misgivings were temporarily lost sight of in her increasing concern for the outlaw's daughter.

CHAPTER XIV.

A BLOODLESS VICTORY.

MEANWHILE, the intrepid band of outlaw-hunters, under the leadership of Headlight Harry, were pressing resolutely on their hazardous way. So energetically were the hand-cars propelled, that mile after mile of track was covered with astonishing rapidity, and it was not long before a point was reached within a short distance of Silver Creek, in which neighborhood Nick Norman was supposed to have his haunts.

Here it was that Sneaky Sam, acting in his capacity as guide of the expedition, gave directions to halt. The cars were quickly derailed and concealed in a dense thicket; then the bold man-hunters, leaving the vicinity of the railroad, plunged eagerly into the vast forest in quest of their prey.

Sneaky Sam proceeded with the unhesitating air of one who thoroughly knows his way. He was to all appearances sincere in his promise to lead the party to the secret rendezvous of the train-robbers; yet there were not a few who looked upon his movements with suspicion. Watchful eyes ever rested upon him, and more than one hand clutched a trusty weapon, ready to shoot at the first sign of treachery.

If the ruffian divined the suspicion of those who were depending upon for him guidance, he certainly gave no sign of the fact, but plodded steadily on. Headlight Harry kept close by his side, while the others followed along behind.

The guide soon struck a narrow trail, if such it might be called, leading into the heart of the forest; it was but faintly defined, and, indeed, might easily escape the notice of one unskilled in woodcraft. However, Sneaky Sam followed its sinuous windings unerringly, indicating his familiarity with the locality. The trail led gradually up the mountain-side, passing through a dense undergrowth where thorns and briars predominated, and which in many places was well-nigh impassable. Through this entangled mass the outlaw-hunters struggled bravely, ignoring tattered clothes and lacerated skin in their eagerness to reach the end of the trail.

In this uncomfortable fashion they had proceeded for fully half an hour, when suddenly Sneaky Sam gave a cautionary signal that brought every man to an immediate standstill.

"We ain't a great ways now from the spot where the gang was ordered to report," he said, "so I reckon it'll be necessary to mouse about mighty keenful in order to ketch 'em nappin', for they're wide-awake fellers an' kin scent danger like a mouse scents new cheese. Hark! Durned if I don't hear 'em now!"

All listened attentively, and, sure enough, the dull murmur of distant voices came floating to their ears. The tell-tale sound, revealing as it did the whereabouts of the road-wrecker band, at the same time admonished the venturesome man-hunters that they were treading upon dangerous ground where the utmost caution was necessary to promote the success of their enterprise.

Once more the party moved slowly forward, each step being taken with extreme deliberation, for the mere snapping of a stick beneath a careless tread might prove the ruin of their plans. The proximity of the foe, with the immediate prospect of a deadly conflict, failed to abate their enthusiasm in the least. Every eye burned with a determined fire; every hand clutched a trusty weapon, in readiness for the fray.

As they drew nearer the sounds that had first

attracted attention rapidly became more distinct. Boisterous laughter, coarse oaths and jests, with an occasional snatch of ribald song, were now plainly distinguished. The authors of this babel of sound were enjoying themselves to their hearts' content, and that they had no thought of immediate danger was equally apparent from the freedom and boldness of their demonstrations.

Advancing stealthily through the thicket, like so many panthers gliding upon their prey, the bold trailers soon found themselves in full view of the scene. It was a cozy, secluded nook, under the shadow of a stupendous cliff, where the train-robbers had pitched their temporary camp. Gathered around a blazing fire, they were now making merry over a rude repast, in which the consumption of ardent spirits formed an important feature, as was evidenced by the large number of bottles in constant circulation. There were fully two-score of them, great burly fellows all, whose villainous faces were plainly revealed now that the disguising masks had been carelessly flung aside. Many of them sported gold chains, rings and other articles of jewelry, which had fallen to their lot in the division of the plunder, and which afforded a ludicrous contrast to their rough attire and bristling weapons.

It was plain that the entire party was more or less under the influence of liquor, and this fact might well explain their surprising lack of vigilance. They continued to make the welkin resound with their maudlin cries, laughing, singing, cursing, quarreling—no thoughts of peril once entering their muddled minds. Little imagined they, in the midst of the revelry, that more than a score of sturdy, resolute foes were lurking in yon leafy covert, watching every movement with exultant eyes, and needing only a signal to hurl themselves into their midst like a rampant cyclone.

To say that the man-hunters were elated at the unexpected state of affairs would be to but faintly express their feelings. Every man had entered upon the expedition with the belief that the meeting with the outlaws, if indeed they found them at all, would be the signal for a desperate and bloody conflict. But, lo! the festive raiders, taking advantage of their leader's absence, had celebrated their recent victory by getting gloriously drunk, and were now apparently quite at their pursuers' mercy!

Headlight Harry, comprehending at a glance how matters were, lost no time in determining upon a course of action. A single volley discharged into that crowd at such close range would have laid more than half their number low; however, he was resolved to capture every man alive if possible. Whispered instructions were quickly passed along the line of eager fellows who crouched in ambush, fingering ready weapons and impatiently waiting for the commencement of hostilities.

Then suddenly, when the carousal was at its height, the revelers were astounded by the summons that rung upon their ears in tones clear and unmistakable.

"Hands up! Surrender, or you are all dead men!"

And their amazement was intensified when they found themselves surrounded by a cordon of men, whose deadly weapons were leveled on a line with their heads! In utter bewilderment they glared at the new-comers, quite unable to account for their sudden appearance on the scene.

With a vigilant foe in front, and an inaccessible cliff behind, there was little chance for escape by flight; and as for resistance, though the outlaws outnumbered their pursuers nearly two to one, many of them had carelessly thrown aside their weapons, while the others were for the most part too stupefied by drink to think of showing fight.

Consequently Headlight Harry's command required no repetition, for the robbers comprehended how completely they were trapped, and elevated their hands without delay. Within ten minutes every man of the rascally gang was disarmed and secured beyond all possibility of working further mischief.

Thus it was that the intrepid outlaw-hunters, who had sworn to hunt down and capture Nick Norman's band, were enabled to accomplish their purpose without firing a single shot; and it is needless to say their exultation was unbounded. The victory could scarcely be considered complete, for the notorious leader, Nick Norman, whose capture was particularly desired, chancing to be temporarily absent, had consequently escaped the fate of his luckless followers. It was probable, however, that the redoubtable chief was still somewhere in the immediate vicinity, and the hunters were therefore sanguine that a thorough and persistent search would result in his speedy capture.

But, while the man-hunters were rejoicing over their bloodless victory, it was suddenly discovered that one of their number was missing. Roy Nebi, the Express-messenger, who had figured prominently in the expedition, was now conspicuous by his absence. No one had observed his departure, and therefore the circumstances attending his disappearance were involved in deep mystery. In the face of this new difficulty, the search for Nick Norman was temporarily abandoned, while the party prepared to devote their energies to ascertaining the whereabouts of their missing friend and comrade, whose mysterious disappearance caused no little surprise and anxiety.

While the events just described were taking place, Nick Norman was enjoying a few hours of rest and comfort at his mountain home, quite oblivious of the fate that had overtaken his band. Of course he expected that great excitement and indi-

nation would succeed the daring train-robbery, and that a party would doubtless be sent in quest of the offenders; but he little imagined that the citizens would exercise such surprising celerity in following up the trail. Moreover, so carefully had he covered his tracks, that he entertained no fear of any party penetrating his retreat, at least not without long and persistent search. The possibility of one of his band turning traitor did not occur to his mind.

So, without thought of immediate peril, the outlaw leader left his men to their own resources for awhile, and turned his steps in the direction of the woodland cabin which was not far away. Highly elated at the success of his daring enterprise, he walked along with buoyant stride, whistling a lively air in the exuberance of his joy, his capacious pockets bulging with money and valuables taken from the luckless excursionists, of which he had shrewdly contrived to secure the lion's share.

The fair inmates of the cabin were enraged in pleasant conversation when suddenly Nick Norman's cheery whistle warned them of his approach.

"It's father!" cried Madge, springing quickly to her feet in evident delight.

Mabel Melrose started and turned pale at the announcement, much of her old fear returning at the thought of again encountering the notorious outlaw. Dismayed, she fled into the inner apartment as Madge hastened outside to welcome her parent.

"What, back again so soon, father?" greeted the beautiful girl, as Norman quickly approached.

"Yes, pet; but, my stay will be very brief this time," the outlaw returned, as he fondly caressed his daughter. "You know the men are in camp half a mile below, so I thought I would run up to see how you are progressing with your new companion, and at the same time snatch a bite to eat and a few winks of sleep, for I'm sadly in need of both. But what about the girl? She hasn't eluded your vigilance and effected her escape already, I hope?"

"I thought you had a higher opinion of my ability, father, than to ask such a needless question," replied Madge, in mild reproach. "When you set me so easy a task as this, have no fear that I will fail to perform it faithfully."

"Good girl, Madge! I know you can be trusted every time. But how does the young lady like her new quarters? I trust she is not homesick already."

"She accepts the situation far more willingly than I expected. You see, I have explained your object in holding her a prisoner here, at the same time assuring her that she need expect nothing but the best of treatment while she remains with me. This has served to dispel her fears; and, indeed, I'm half-inclined to think she is more pleased than otherwise at the opportunity for so romantic an adventure."

"Ha ha! I'm glad you are getting along so smoothly with your fair prisoner," laughed Nick Norman. "But don't allow your interest in her to run away with your caution, for her apparent resignation may be assumed for the purpose of putting you off your guard. Do not relax your vigilance for an instant, Madge, for this girl is worth a mint of money to us now."

"How much, father?"

"Well, I wouldn't think of taking less than ten thousand dollars for her ransom, and I entertain hopes of securing twice that sum. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, old Melrose thinks too much of his fair daughter to hesitate long over the payment of a few thousands."

"When will you endeavor to secure this money?" inquired Madge, interestedly.

"Not for a few days, at any rate, for last night's exploit will stir up a regular hornets' nest about our ears if we're not mighty careful about exposing ourselves to public gaze."

"What! We are in no danger here, I trust, father?"

"Not in the least, child," declared the outlaw, confidently. "They will never think of searching for us here. We have merely to lay low for a few days, until the excitement has somewhat abated; then I'll strike for the boodle—and get it, too, there's little doubt about that. Meantime, we must rest content with the proceeds of last night's work, which by the way, is well worth keeping, though it's not a circumstance to what will follow if all goes well. See, Madge!"

Diving into his capacious pockets, Nick Norman produced a double handful of greenbacks which he waved triumphantly.

"Feast your eyes on these, pet! I tell you our enterprise panned out magnificently, and no mistake. Thousands of dollars in cash and jewelry fell to our lot, and the best of it is that I contrived to secure the larger part of the money myself, leaving the boys to divide up the watches and rings and other bulky stuff, for which I have no particular use. Trust me to arrange matters to my own satisfaction, every time. Ha, ha!"

Madge Norman, however, shared little of her father's elation at the acquisition of so much wealth.

"I care nothing for the money," she declared, "but I am glad you were successful in your undertaking for the reason that you will now be able to fulfill the promise you made me."

"What was the promise, Madge?"

"Why, have you forgotten so soon?" reproachfully. "You promised that this should be your last deed of outlawry—that when you had raised a little money you would abandon this wild and lawless life and take me to some distant part of the country, there to begin a new and better career. You know how lonely I am in this cheerless place, and how happy I would be to return to civilization. Surely, father, you will not disappoint me, now!"

"No, pet; you shall not be disappointed," and the

outlaw's reply was quick and decisive. "Were I all alone in the world, I would like nothing better than to remain here in the mountains, devoting the remainder of my life to harassing my enemies. But for your sake, Madge, I have decided to seek 'fresh fields and pastures new,' and endeavor to lead a more respectable life in the future."

"Thank God for that decision! When shall we leave this place, fath'r?" and the fair girl's voice trembled with suppressed eagerness.

"Just as soon as I complete negotiations with Maurice Melrose in regard to his daughter. The money secured from him will be sufficient to give us a royal start in our new career; in fact, it ought to keep us in comfort the balance of our existence. But come! I am spending too much time in empty talk, I fear. I don't like to leave the boys for any length of time, but I do calculate to enjoy a little food and rest before I return, although the opportunity is extremely limited."

Father and daughter entered the cabin together, and Madge immediately set out an appetizing lunch that was quickly devoured by the hungry outlaw. The latter then threw himself upon his own inviting couch, giving directions to be called in an hour's time, and was almost immediately fast asleep.

He was the deep, unbroken slumber of a thoroughly tired man, and it was with no little regret that Madge aroused him at the expiration of the allotted period. Norman was quickly upon his feet, bright and vigorous after his brief but refreshing nap.

"I must hurry back to the camp," he said. "The men may become unmanageable if left alone too long, and I cannot be too cautious. So, good-by, pet, until I return; and don't forget to take good care of our precious guest in yonder. Guard her as you would a mine of gold, for she is scarcely less valuable. *Au revoir!*"

Tenderly kissing the cheek of his fair daughter, Nick Norman strode hastily from the cabin. Madge followed to the open door, and watched the stalwart outlaw as he hurried across the clearing and plunged into the gloomy forest. Her beautiful face was illuminated by a glorious smile that clearly reflected the unusual happiness reigning within her bosom.

"Can he be really in earnest?" she murmured. "Is it possible that the time I have so long prayed for is now at hand? It seems too good to be true, that this lonely, perilous life is nearing its end. God grant nothing will occur to swerve dear father from the fulfillment of his promise."

Alas! for pretty Madge Norman and her roseate dreams of future happiness. The solitary existence that she had so long endured for her erring father's sake was, indeed, destined soon to end, but in a far different manner than she anticipated. Alas! too, for the outlaw leader's cherished plans. All too soon were they to be shattered by the ruthless hands of the enemies at that moment diligently engaged in running him to earth. Retributive justice was close upon Nick Norman's trail, and he was not long in discovering the unexpected danger.

Approaching the camp of his followers, some subtle sense of impending evil caused him to exercise more than ordinary caution, and so he was enabled to learn the true state of affairs without revealing his presence to the foe. It would be difficult, indeed, to depict the feelings of the outlaw when he beheld his entire band bound and helpless, surrounded by men whom he had fondly believed to be many miles away. There was the look of a very demon on his face, as he glared wildly at the scene from his hiding-place in the bushes, and he nervously clutched his revolvers as though about to attack his hated enemies, single-handed.

But sober second-thought prevented so suicidal a step, and caused Nick Norman to seek safety in immediate flight. Retreating with extreme caution until well out of earshot, he then broke into a rapid run, shaping his course in the direction of the mountain cabin. Wild-eyed and haggard, with whirling brains and quickened breath, conscious only of the awful danger that menaced him, he tore along the rugged path like a madman—on, on, with gigantic bounds until he reached the little clearing.

Madge Norman still stood in the open doorway, wrapped in contemplative dreams of a blissful future, when the hunted outlaw made his sudden reappearance. She saw at once from his hasty movements and terrified mien that something serious had happened, and quickly came running out to meet him.

"Why, what is the matter, father?" she inquired, in deep concern, as Nick Norman reached her side, panting and breathless from his headlong run.

"Matter?" echoed the latter, hoarsely. "Everything's the matter, a thousand curses on my infernal luck! The cursed bloodhounds are on our track—they have already captured my entire gang, and will probably discover this place within an hour."

"Oh, father! What shall we do?"

"Fly further up the mountain-side and trust to luck to escape. It's our last and only chance. Where is that cursed girl? They sha'n't have her at any rate!"

The outlaw stepped toward the cabin as he spoke, a maniacal glare in his snaky eyes, and in his face the semblance of a very fiend; but Madge, quick to observe his ominous aspect, threw herself determinedly before him.

"Stop, father! What are you about to do?" she cried.

"Out of the way, girl!" yelled Nick Norman, fiercely, accompanying the speech by a vigorous push that sent the fair girl reeling from him.

She stumbled and fell, with a low cry, and lay quite motionless upon the earth; while the infuriated outlaw, transformed into a veritable madman,

paused not to note the work of his ruthless hand but darted into the apartment where Mabel Melrose now crouched in speechless terror.

CHAPTER XV. ROY TO THE RESCUE.

It will now be necessary to follow the adventures of Roy Noble, the Express-messenger, whose sudden disappearance had created no little surprise and alarm among his comrades.

When Headlight Harry's trailers left the railroad and plunged into the forest, Roy was still with the party, and no man was more zealous than he in the pursuit of the train-robbers; but the trail of the latter had not been followed long before he made the unpleasant discovery that the revolver usually carried in his belt was missing.

Considering the fact that this was his only weapon, the loss was, indeed, a serious one; and, realizing of what little use he would be to the party without it, he immediately took measures to recover the lost shooting-iron. Only a few moments previously he had met with an ignoble tumble in the attempt to surmount a fallen tree, and, as he recalled this incident, it was to feel confident that the revolver was jostled from his belt at that particular time and place.

So, he immediately retraced his steps without saying a word to the others regarding his intentions, as he deemed it but the work of a few moments to find the weapon, and then overtake his companions.

When Roy reached the fallen tree, near which he expected to find his missing revolver, it was to meet with disappointment, for a minute search failed to reveal any trace of it. However, knowing that it was safe in his belt when he left the car, and consequently must be somewhere near, he continued along the rugged trail, closely scanning the ground as he went. Perseverance was at last rewarded, for he found the object of his search lying directly in the path, bright and unsullied, though at a considerable distance from the spot where he had first sought it.

Again he retraced his steps with all possible haste, though progress was necessarily slow from the fact that the way was intricate and the trail in places very indistinct, making it imperative for one unfamiliar with the locality to exercise considerable care to avoid losing the way entirely. Proceeding in this manner, Roy had reached a spot slightly beyond where he parted from his comrades, when, by mere accident, he made a discovery that changed his plans completely.

Glancing carelessly from side to side as he hastened along, his keen eye was attracted by a small white object that fluttered from the top of a lofty bush a dozen yards from the trail. Prompted by curiosity, the young man fought his way through a mass of tangled briars, and grasped the article that had challenged his attention.

A lady's handkerchief of costly texture, with the monogram "M. M." elaborately wrought in one corner—such was the object at which Roy Noble found himself staring in unspeakable amazement.

That the handkerchief was the property of Mabel Melrose he had not the slightest doubt, and equally certain it was to his mind that the fair girl had recently passed near to that identical spot. He was shrewd enough to carefully observe the manner in which the handkerchief was attached to the bush, and reached the conclusion that it had not been blown from the trail, but from a direction precisely opposite.

The outcome of this conclusion was an immediate search for the further evidence which he believed to exist in that quarter; and so indefatigably did he pursue his investigations that ere long success rewarded his efforts. A short distance from the spot where the handkerchief was discovered, he came upon another footpath, the course of which was gradually divergent from the first.

Close scrutiny of the faintly defined trail satisfied Roy that it had been traversed quite recently; and no doubt existed in his mind that this narrow, straggling path in the wilderness would, if followed, lead to the presence of Mabel Melrose. But, succeeding the double discovery, came the question whether he should continue his investigations alone and unaided, or first endeavor to overtake his late companions, and secure their assistance.

Headlight Harry's party was now far away, intent upon the capture of the train-robbers; though even were they within hailing distance, Roy would scarcely have dared call to them, lest his cries be heard by the outlaws who were supposed to be no great distance away. So, after a few moments of doubt and hesitation, the young trailer concluded to keep on alone rather than lose valuable time in hunting up his friends.

Accordingly, the youth moved ahead without further loss of time, eagerly following the sinuous windings of the rugged mountain path until at last he stood at the edge of a small clearing and saw before him the cabin home of Nick Norman. It was not the mere discovery of the habitation alone, however, that surprised the young trailer, but the fact that standing before him was a young girl of marvelous grace and beauty—indeed, the fairest being it had ever been his good fortune to set eyes upon.

Roy had frequently met Madge Norman when she resided in the village, and now, as she leaned against the door of the cabin only a few paces away, every feature plainly revealed to the eager eyes of the young trailer, he needed but a glance to know that the outlaw's daughter and this woodland nymph were identical.

It followed, then, that this secluded hut in the forest was Nick Norman's home; and Roy doubted not that the girl he sought was at that moment concealed within. As he crouched in the shelter of a

friendly thicket, feasting his eyes on that rare vision of loveliness, and vaguely wondering what course to pursue, the youth was suddenly startled by the tramp of heavy feet through the underbrush, while an instant later a man bounded into the clearing at a point not a dozen feet from his hiding-place.

The new-comer was Nick Norman, panting and breathless from his long, hard run; and Roy knew by the desperate haste and wild, haunted looks of the outlaw, that something unusual had occurred to destroy his equanimity. He could plainly hear Norman's words as the latter made known to his startled daughter the fact that his men were prisoners, and urged the necessity of instant flight. Then he saw the ruffian rush toward the cabin, ruthlessly hurling aside the frail girl who sought to stay his progress.

Up to this moment Roy Noble had remained passive, but when he heard the outlaw's ominous words and saw him dash like a madman into the hut, he felt that the time for prompt and determined action had arrived. Breaking from cover, he sped across the clearing with quick and powerful bounds. A woman's scream reached his ears as he ran, and entering the hut he saw Mabel Melrose struggling in the grasp of the infuriated ruffian.

Not one instant did the young man pause, but with one tigerish leap hurled himself forward, launching his clinched fist full in Nick Norman's face. It was a terrific blow, delivered with all the strength of which the youth was the master, and the outlaw with all his boasted agility was unable to avoid it, taken as he was completely by surprise. He released his hold on the girl and staggered back, half-stunned, while Roy followed up his advantage with another blow that sent his enemy to earth. As Norman fell, his head encountered the hard floor with such force that he lay quite unconscious, while his conqueror stood over his prostrate form, scarcely realizing that the redoubtable outlaw had, indeed, been so easily placed *hors du combat*.

As for Mabel Melrose, her astonishment at beholding her friend was only equalled by the joy she felt in the knowledge that she was at last free from Nick Norman's power; and it is needless to say that she extended a warm and affectionate greeting to her gallant rescuer.

There was no time to lose, however, for Roy was anxious to rejoin his late companions and acquaint them with his good fortune; and, as the trailers had already accomplished the capture of the robber gang, it was possible that they would prepare to leave the vicinity at once, in which case he would be left with a veritable white elephant on his hands. Accordingly, after securely binding the fallen ruffian as a preventive of escape should he recover consciousness before their return, the young man escorted his fair companion from the place that had for a brief time been her prison.

In the excitement of the moment, Madge Norman had been forgotten; but now, as they emerged from the cabin, it was to find the unfortunate girl still lying where she had fallen. With a low cry of surprise and horror, Mabel rushed quickly to her side. "Oh! Tell me, is she dead?" she asked, appealingly, as she chafed the girl's cold hands and kissed her marble brow.

"No; only stunned, I think," returned Roy, after a hasty examination. "She will probably soon regain her senses, though no thanks to her scoundrelly father that she wasn't killed outright."

He tenderly lifted the unconscious maiden and, carrying her within the hut, laid her gently upon her own downy couch. This done he rejoined his companion, and together they hurried from the clearing in the direction from whence Nick Norman had but recently come.

"My friends should not be far away, according to my calculations. Indeed, they may be at this moment within hailing distance. I will try!"

An instant later his voice arose in a lusty shout that fairly made the welkin ring; and, listening attentively, an answering cry soon came faintly to their eager ears.

"Good! The boys are near and have heard my shout. We will soon be with them, now," exclaimed Roy, in elation.

He repeated his hail at intervals as they hastened forward, and each time the answer grew in distinctness, until at last they reached the outlaw camp and found themselves in the midst of Headlight Harry's trailers!

As may well be imagined, their appearance created no little surprise, and Roy Noble found himself assailed by countless questions, all of which he was quite ready and eager to answer. It was with pardonable self-satisfaction that he recounted his adventures, and noted the pleased surprise of his hearers when they learned that Nick Norman was a prisoner.

Without loss of time the entire party started for the mountain cabin.

They soon reached the clearing and passed with eager steps through the open door of the cabin, then paused abruptly, exultance suddenly changed to consternation as they found that the place was quite empty. Both Nick Norman and his beautiful daughter had vanished from the scene!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END.

It was in vain that the new-comers hunted the cabin for some trace of its recent occupants. Though left alone but a very short time, they had found it amply sufficient in which to effect their escape, and naught remained but the dwelling and its contents to reward the trailers for their journey.

"Well, pard, I fail to discover any signs of your prisoners," said Headlight Harry, turning a quizzical glance upon Roy Noble, who looked at that

moment the embodiment of disgust and bewilderment. "In what particular corner did you tuck them away?"

"Why, I left them right here, safe enough—both unconscious, too. I don't see how they managed to get away so quickly," faltered poor Roy, whose discomfort was something painful to witness.

"I alius b'lieved Nick Norman was related to his namesake, Ole Nick, so I reckon he jest dissolved hisself into thin air an' floated away up the chimby," was the quaint theory that Rufe Ruffle advanced.

"Well, there's no denying the fact that they've vamoosed. Did you leave 'em well tied up, Roy?"

"Ye-es! That is, I didn't pinion the girl, for she was lying like one dead, and gave no sign of recovering her senses for an hour or two at least."

"That explains the mystery," declared Headlight Harry, grimly. "The shrewd young lady, instead of being so far gone as you imagined, was probably playing possum, and no sooner had you disappeared than she cut her beloved sire loose and helped him to escape. Nothing could be easier."

"True! Confound my stupidity! What a fool I was, to be sure!" and Roy's misery was so apparent that the others forgot their disappointment and joined in a roar of laughter.

The remainder of the party arrived at this moment, and, when it was known how matters stood, luckless Roy Noble became the target for a volley of sarcastic remarks, all of which he received in the good-natured spirit in which they were given, feeling that he richly merited their ridicule by his recent lack of caution.

"Never mind, Roy," said Headlight Harry, at length. "It's a disappointment, to be sure, but the result will be merely to give Nick Norman an extra bit of rope, and he'll reach the end of it quickly enough. The rascal can't be far away, and we are bound to run him to earth. He cannot escape us!"

The trailers were now gathered in a group just outside the hunted man's cabin, and hardly had Headlight Harry ceased speaking when the sharp, spiteful crack of a pistol broke suddenly upon the air, accompanied by a yell of mortal agony that came from their very midst.

It needed but an instant to discover the victim of that mysterious shot. Sneaky Sam, the informer, lay writhing on the ground, the life-blood gushing from an ugly wound in his breast. And, as he fell, a vengeful voice was heard, sounding from a point high above the heads of the startled throng.

"Die, Sneaky Sam, like the treacherous dog you are! Your treachery has wrought my ruin, and there is your reward—the just deserts of a traitor! Ha, ha!"

Gazing bewilderedly heavenward, the trailers beheld the well-known figure of Nick Norman perched on the very crest of the lofty cliff. He leaned far over the dizzy verge, holding in one hand a still smoking pistol, while the other was clinched and shaken vigorously at his enemies below.

Only an instant did he remain thus, a picture of scorn and defiance. While twenty pairs of eyes glared at the audacious outlaw, and twenty gleaming weapons were coming to a line with his stalwart form, a tragedy was enacted so swift, so terrible, so unexpected as to thrill every soul with horror.

The edge of the cliff on which Nick Norman perched so precariously was suddenly seen to yield beneath his weight. The man saw his peril and made an Herculean effort to save himself, but in vain. He tottered for an instant on the giddy verge, then, with a despairing cry, went down, down through empty space, striking with a sickening thud at the very feet of the trailers.

Horror-stricken, they gathered round the luckless outlaw only to find that life was quite extinct. An almost shapeless mass of flesh was all that remained on earth of Nick Norman; and they who gazed upon his remains could but realize how swift and certain was the retribution that had overtaken the assassin.

While the trailers stood aghast at the awful tragedy that had been enacted before their eyes, an agonized scream suddenly broke upon the air, and, looking up, they beheld Madge Norman standing at the top of the height. Leaning far over the perilous cliff, her graceful form outlined against the sky; the beautiful girl glared wildly down into the clearing at the group of hostile men who had invaded her quiet home; then, as her gaze rested upon the form of her father lying so still and lifeless in their midst, she uttered one wild, maniacal cry and suddenly turned and fled.

A dozen men promptly started in pursuit, only to find that the cliff was quite inaccessible from their position, and much time was wasted before they eventually discovered a roundabout way to the top. Meantime the road-raider's daughter had ample opportunity to make her escape, and she covered her tracks so cunningly that, after a long and fruitless search, the pursuers were compelled to return without.

Preparations were now made for the return to Richville, for the day was fast waning and Headlight Harry was anxious to place his many prisoners safely in durance vile before nightfall. As a further precaution against escape, in addition to having their arms pinioned, the gathered-in rogues were now bound closely to each other in couples, a quantity of stout cord found in the cabin being used for this purpose. The bodies of Nick Norman and his victim, Sneaky Sam, were carefully wrapped in blankets, also obtained from the hut. Then, all preparations completed, the victorious man-hunters left the clearing and turned their faces homeward.

A long and tiresome tramp was before them, but they pressed on bravely and soon left the mountain cabin far behind. As they pushed steadily ahead through the darkening forest, Headlight Harry's

party suddenly found themselves face to face with a large body of armed men. It proved to be the expedition organized by the Richvilians to hunt for Norman's band. They had spent the day in fruitless search, finally drifting in that direction just in time to encounter their more successful rivals.

Their astonishment at this unexpected meeting was complete, and only excelled by their disgust and chagrin at seeing the prize snatched from their grasp. However, this disappointment was partially forgotten in the general satisfaction at the capture of the train robbers; and therefore, it was without hesitation that the new-comers fraternized with their rival, ready to congratulate them upon their remarkable victory.

When the successful man-hunters entered Richville, just at nightfall, it was to find that the news of their exploits had preceded them. Hundreds of excited citizens surrounded the party, breathing vengeance against the cowering prisoners, and for a time it appeared that Judge Lynch would have full sway; but, Headlight Harry pushed forward determinedly, and finally succeeded in lodging his captives within the walls of the jail, safe from the howling populace.

The storm of excitement that attended the train-robbery quickly gave way to universal joy and thanksgiving, when it became generally known that the entire gang of miscreants had been captured in less than twenty-four hours after the perpetration of their crime.

Headlight Harry and Rufe Ruffle suddenly found themselves elevated to the plane of heroes in public estimation. Not only had they saved two trains and hundreds of passengers from destruction, but it was through their prompt and resolute action that the robber band was brought so speedily to justice.

As for the munificent reward offered by the railroad company for the apprehension of the robbers, it was conceded that Headlight Harry's party had richly earned the prize; and, accordingly, the amount was promptly paid over and equally divided among the successful trailers.

No one questioned Roy Noble's right to the reward offered by Maurice Melrose for the recovery of his daughter, and his many friends were prompt to congratulate him on his good fortune. However, Roy had another certain object in view, as was evidenced when, on a pleasant morning, he made his way to the private office of the great railroad magnate. The latter greeted him courteously, and said, as he glanced at the card that his visitor had sent in:

"I have heard of you before, Mr. Noble, and indeed had expected to see you ere this. I suppose you have come to obtain that reward!"

"Such is far from being my intention, sir," the Express-messenger promptly declared. "I wish to have it understood that my efforts in behalf of your daughter were made with no idea of a money recompense. I lay no claim to the reward that you have so generously offered. The object of this visit, Mr. Noble, is to speak to you on a far different subject."

"Well?"

"To come to the point at once, sir, I am in love with your daughter, Mabel, and I have every reason to believe that my affection is fully reciprocated. Therefore, I have come to ask your consent to our union, that alone being needed to complete our happiness. May I not hope for a favorable answer to my request?"

To say that Maurice Melrose was surprised at this bold declaration on the part of his youthful visitor, would be to but faintly express his emotion. Being quite unprepared for such a request, Roy's audacity fairly took the old gentleman's breath away; but he was not long in realizing that his would-be son-in-law was thoroughly in earnest.

It is needless to reproduce the long and interesting conversation that ensued, enough to say that, when at last Roy Noble emerged from the presence of the railroad magnate, his smiling face and elastic step indicated that the visit had not proved altogether fruitless, and therefore it is safe to predict a wedding at no distant day in which he and fair Mabel will be the parties most particularly concerned.

Meantime, the community was rapidly recovering from the state of excitement into which it had been thrown by the stirring events succeeding the memorable opening of the Belmont Branch. With the notorious Nick Norman lying in the village churchyard, and his scarcely less rascally followers in the law's relentless grasp, the citizens were to be congratulated upon the prospect of future immunity from the scenes of outlawry and bloodshed that had characterized the past.

A party was sent to the mountain haunts of the outlaw chief to search for his missing daughter, but a long and persistent quest revealed not the slightest trace of her whereabouts; and so the fate of beautiful, unfortunate Madge Norman promised to remain an impenetrable mystery.

As for the captive rogues, they were soon brought to trial and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, a punishment which their many misdemeanors richly merited.

The Railroad Pards, content in the knowledge of brave deeds nobly done, returned to their life of toil and danger, and may be seen daily as they speed along the line, guiding the Fast Express. As their career is fraught with constant excitement and peril, it is not improbable that they may again be called upon to participate in stirring adventures, in which case they will be true to their record as gallant, bold-hearted knights of the rail.

THE END.

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- 209 Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective.
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- 226 Snoozer, the Boy Sharp; or, The Arab Detective.
- 236 Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado.
- 240 Cyclone Kit, the Young Gladiator.
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- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
- 255 Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.
- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
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- 281 Denver Doll's Victory.
- 285 Denver Doll's Decoy; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
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- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
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- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
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- 456 Billy Britek, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
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- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
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- 667 Bob and Sam, the Daisy Detectives.

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- 88 Rollo, the Boy Ranger.
- 134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.
- 143 Scar-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
- 146 Silver Star, the Boy Knight.
- 153 Eagle Kit, the Boy Demon.
- 163 Little Texas, the Young Mustanger.
- 178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
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- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
- 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
- 238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
- 243 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
- 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkkin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
- 384 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
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- 426 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 441 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
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